



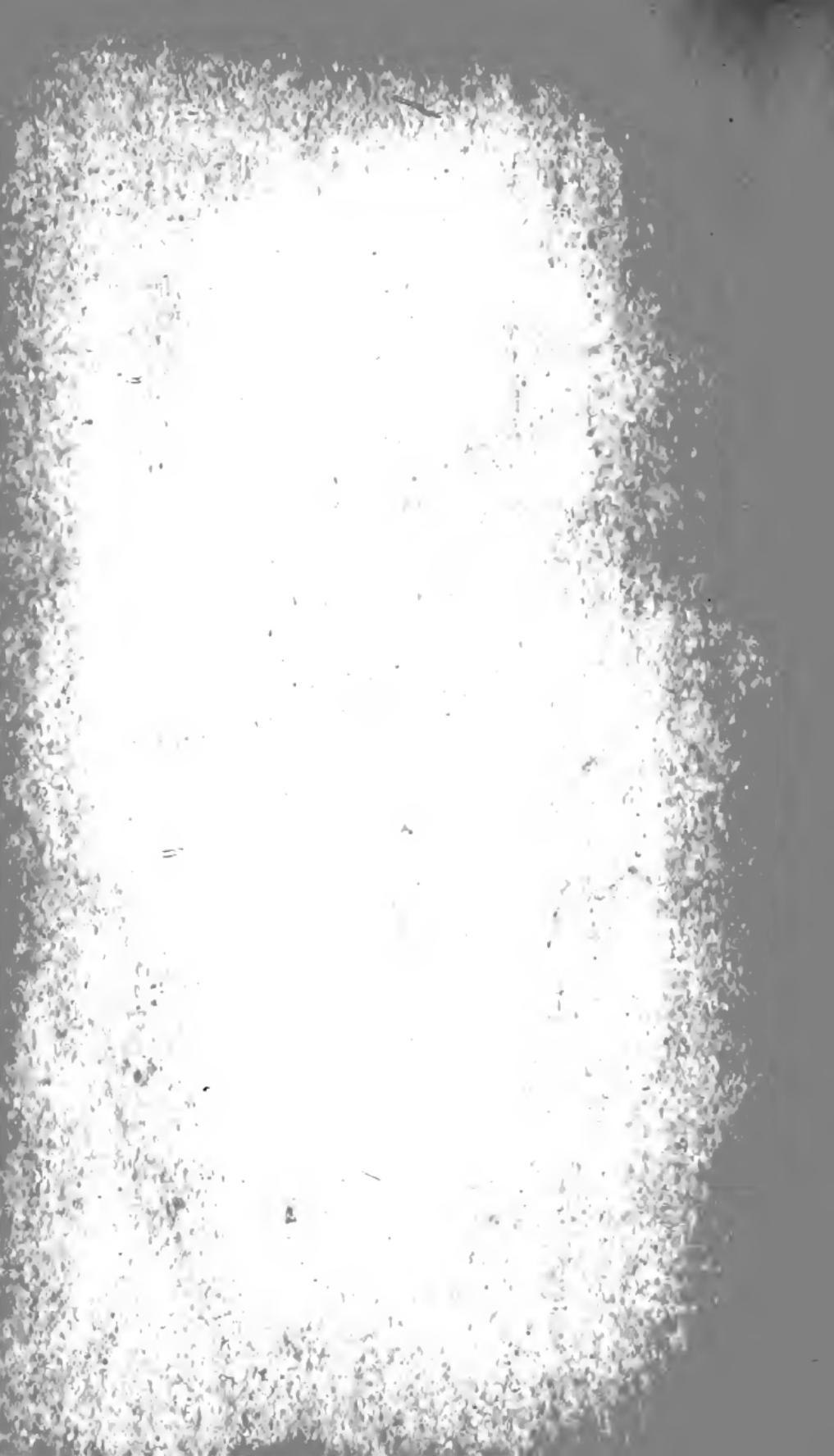
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# THE IDES OF MARCH.

VOL. III.



# THE IDES OF MARCH

BY

G. M. ROBINS

AUTHOR OF

‘THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE,’ ‘A FALSE POSITION,’ ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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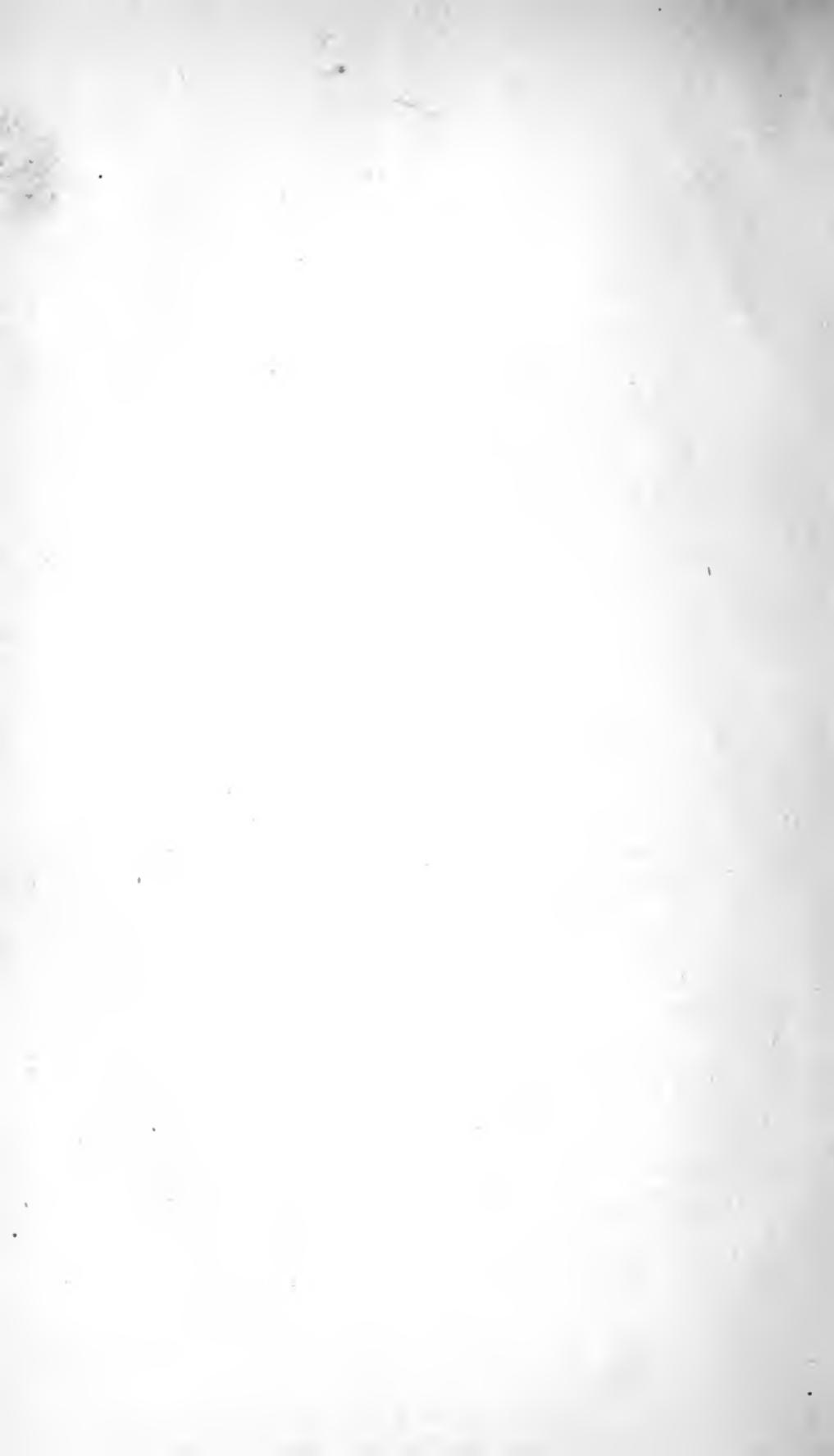
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# THE IDES OF MARCH.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE MAJOR'S ANNOUNCEMENT.

Because the very fiends weave ropes of sand  
Rather than taste pure hell in idleness,  
Therefore I kept my memory down by stress  
Of daily work.

ROBERT BROWNING.

MRS. SAXON, as she sat at lunch, looked anxiously from time to time at Mr. Westmorland. Something in his appearance made her uneasy, a certain livid look about the complexion, and a most unaccustomed hesitancy of speech.

‘I must have caught cold,’ he remarked once, ‘I feel such a stiffness in my left arm—I can scarcely raise it. Farren applied some embrocation this morning, but it has not afforded much relief.’

‘You must keep out of draughts,’ said Mrs. Saxon, authoritatively. ‘You should not have come and stood outside just now, in that biting wind; the Major will tell me I do not take care of you.’

‘Pooh! Evelyn labours under the idea that I am utterly senile and decrepit. I am much annoyed by the fuss he is always making.’

Evidently his son’s return had incensed him unusually; she had never heard him so venomous; and, feeling vexed with her old friend, she turned to Miss Dinwiddie, and the conversation flowed into health channels, ambulance lectures being the particular point in discussion.

In the midst of it all, Evelyn Westmor-

land walked quietly in. If his father had seemed to Mrs. Saxon to be looking ill, she thought so a thousand times more of himself. There was not a particle of colour in his face, and his eyes were hollow and dark; he looked fatigued to the point of exhaustion, so much so that she thought something must have happened, and half rose from her seat, but sat down again, checking the exclamation that rose to her lips, because she hated a commotion. He was at the last point of depression—wearied out with his tormenting, conflicting feelings, and, after a hurried greeting and apology to her for being late for lunch, he hastily left the room, and repaired to his own, to wash his hands and make himself presentable after his journey.

Could it all really be true, that nightmare-like drive with Disney? Had he really heard him laugh lightly, seen him smile a careless, happy smile, totally untinged by

painful memory? and was it a fact that he cheerfully 'owned the past was best,' and admitted candidly that Hope Merrion was justified in dismissing him? It seemed to turn all Evelyn's world upside down. What had he done? What must Hope think of him? No wonder she would not condescend to vindicate herself. The marvel was how he, Evelyn, could possibly have held such an erroneous opinion of Disney's character. Yet what a charming, taking fellow he was! Even to-day, with all his disapproval, with all his own unavailing, bitter regret, he yet must feel the spell of that handsome face, the glamour of those beautiful blue eyes.

After all, what had Disney's offence been? Barely enough flirtation to qualify him for a hero in the eyes of John Strange Winter. He had amused himself with a pretty girl whom he did not mean to marry, and the pretty girl in question had

been foolish enough to take it to heart. For this—only this—was the woman to whom he was engaged to throw him over? Very tenderly does 'he world, and John Strange Winter as its prophet, judge such amiable weaknesses. Evelyn could recall one touching story from her pen, in which the hero, arising on the morning after a ball, hazily tries to remember how many times the night before he kissed a certain pretty little girl; he also counts the trophies he received from her—the roses and knots of ribbon, and the long glove, edged with real lace. In cheery mood, he proceeds to make a 'holocaust' of this stolen property in the fireplace, and then goes for a walk, with a stainless conscience, and is rewarded by meeting another charming girl who gives him her entire devotion.

Mr. Ruskin tells us that he much admires the work of this author: somehow Major Westmorland did not. He was absolutely

on the side of Hope Merrion. No woman could more severely condemn Disney's conduct than he did. No hope, no remedy for the poor girl who had mistaken the handsome young officer's intentions! Evelyn's heart swelled and choked within him: in his first fierce anger he told himself that no gentleman should associate with such a man: the utter thoughtlessness of his friend was unintelligible to him.

Nothing, nothing could alter the past: and, after all, he had only himself to blame. For what purpose had God given him eyes, but to see and feel the nobility of Hope's nature? He ought to have seen it. Her light-hearted gaiety had partly misled him: his ponderous gravity could not realize the deep waters under that sparkling surface.

Oh, why—why—had things happened with such terrible perversity! Had he

only delayed speaking to Leo for one day! . . .

He caught himself up hastily, with a contemptuous laugh. What would Hope have been likely to say to him? Was it likely that ever, under any circumstances, she would have loved him?

Ah, but he might have loved her, might have poured out his devotion at her feet, might have felt that his great love gave him a right to die for her.

How clear and sharp arose in his memory the vision of the small, white face and blazing eyes, with a background of lowering storm-clouds! How there rang in his ears the echo of the voice which had cried, '*I hate you!*'

He was so glad to think that at least he had believed in her then: that was his only comfort. Though nothing whatever had occurred to vindicate her motives in his eyes, though the situation was the

same in all points as at their first introduction, yet that day on the moors he had believed in her utterly. It was all past and done away with now. His walk in life lay before him mapped out clearly enough.

Leo had said she loved him, and all his future was implicitly hers. He meant to love her very much, to give his life up to making her happy; but he craved for a respite, time to go away and live down this agony of mind which the events of yesterday and to-day had engendered. Was it really yesterday only? What folly it seemed! Years might have lapsed since he asked pretty Leo to marry him.

He seemed snared and kept in on all sides. He *must* speak to his father now, he stood pledged to do so. How could he tell how cold an ocean of misery and regret would roll over him on the drive through the innocent green lanes?

‘You do look ill, sir,’ observed Farren, who, on hearing of the Major’s arrival, had come to see if he was in want of anything.

‘I got wet through yesterday, and am tired out: that’s all,’ replied Evelyn.

‘The master, he’s not the thing to-day—no, not by any means,’ went on Farren.

‘Not well?’ sharply cried Evelyn.

‘No, sir, he’s not; I am glad you’ve come back.’

‘You have been allowing him to take a chill!’ said the son, wrathfully.

‘I don’t see how I’m to prevent master doing as he pleases, sir. He would stroll round the garden yesterday, after all that pouring rain, with Mrs. Saxon, looking at the tents——’

‘Confound the tents!’ was the irritable interruption. ‘What makes you think he isn’t well?’

‘He looks so bad, sir, and complains of stiffness in the limbs.’

A sudden chill crept over Evelyn; a strange idea visited him. Suppose that his father, that central pivot of his existence, and object of his present sacrifice, were to be taken away from him?

Such a thing was possible. If it happened, would he, Evelyn, have the moral courage to carry through his engagement? . . . Or perhaps the moral courage to break it off? Which course would be right? which the harder? He shrank from the hateful problem. The idea had merely flashed through his mind, but it seemed to reveal to him depths of unsuspected baseness in his own character. He delayed no more, but hurried downstairs at once to see how far Farren’s account of his father was worthy of attention, his heart, the while, keenly reproaching him because, in his own dumb misery, he had barely glanced at Mr.

Westmorland on walking into the dining-room—was, in fact, quite ignorant of how he looked.

The luncheon-party was just separating as he re-appeared. He was introduced to the Misses Sharpley and Dinwiddie, to whom, as was his custom, he bowed without looking at them.

'So sorry,' gushed Miss Dinwiddie to him, in most superfluous apology, 'to be obliged to run away at once ; but we shall meet at dinner, I hope. I am staying here until after the meeting.'

'Indeed,' said the Major, in his grimdest tones.

'The ladies' committee meets at three, and it is almost that now, so I know you will excuse us,' said Mrs. Saxon to his father, as she passed his seat. 'There, I see the Palace carriage driving up ; Mrs. Dunster is arriving, mind you see that the Major eats something.'

Evelyn's eye curiously followed Miss Dinwiddie's fluttering robes until they disappeared, and then he remarked, in tones of some horror,

‘What a caution of a woman!’

‘I believe you are not an admirer of the sex,’ sneered Mr. Westmorland. ‘I only wish you had a tenth part of Miss Dinwiddie’s brains.’

His son did not reply. He carried his plate to the side-board, cut himself some cold meat, and sat down again: Then he turned a keen eye on the profile which fronted him. He thought that he certainly did look ill; and more than ill, aged and altered. A vague shock passed over him, an unexpressed horror which precipitated his action.

He ate a mouthful or two, then laid down his knife and fork, regarding wistfully the ivory-pale, cold, disdainful face.

At his movement, Mr. Westmorland

turned round, bestowing on him a glance of cool contempt.

‘Lost your appetite?’ said he.

‘Father, what have I done? why do you look at me like that?’ pleaded Evelyn, huskily.

‘What do you mean?’

The Major rose, and came round the table.

‘I had expected, I had hoped for a different reception,’ he said, appealingly. ‘I have tried to please you, father. I came back to tell you so. I thought you would be glad.’

‘One thing would make me glad, Evelyn, and only one: to hear of your engagement.’

‘It is that,’ stammered Evelyn, hoarsely. ‘I did not write, I came to tell you so myself. I am engaged.’

The changes that coursed over his father’s expressive face were strange,

almost terrifying, to see. He believed it at once ; little as he knew Evelyn, he yet was sure that in these circumstances he would never jest.

The sudden, startling change—the transition from morbid gloom to frantic joy—the realization of what he had for years hopelessly longed for, was too much for him. He struggled to rise, clutching his son's arm, shoulder, neck, and leaning his weight upon him while he made distressing efforts to articulate. Evelyn's heart almost stopped.

‘Father—dear father—what is it?’ he cried.

‘Who? Who? Her name?’ screamed Mr. Westmorland, at last ; but the scream was little more than a whisper.

‘Her name? Miss Forde—Leo Forde,’ replied the bewildered Evelyn, his eyes fixed in dismay upon the now almost inanimate form in his arms.

‘ Father—father !’ was again his helpless cry, as, his heart bitterly reproaching him for his clumsy way of announcing his tidings, he carefully lowered his burden into a chair. ‘ Good God !’ he gasped, as he looked into the face, an icy terror gripping his heart.

For an instant he recoiled, then sprang to the bell and rang it violently, convulsively ; then darted back to the chair, flung himself on his knees beside it, and cried in vain to ears which did not hear.

The ladies' committee were settling the interesting and important question of what badges should be worn by the stewards. They had just reached the point of red rosettes when Mrs. Saxon, glancing up, saw one of the grooms, mounted on a fast horse, dash past the window and disappear. She at once rang, and, without interrupting the business of the meeting, quietly asked the servant what was wrong.

‘Mr. Westmorland has had a paralytic stroke, ma’am. The left side of his face is all drawn down—he looks awful, ma’am. The master, and the Major, and Farren, they’ve carried him upstairs.’

‘I should have been told at once,’ said Mrs. Saxon.

In a whisper she conveyed to Mrs. Dunster, the bishop’s wife, the fact that she was wanted for a few minutes, and must depute the conduct of the meeting to her, then noiselessly left the room and went upstairs.

Leo Forde, in a clean white dress, stood at the drawing-room window in Minster-gate, watching for the appearance of her lover and his father. At the piano sat Captain Disney, much at his ease, trying over the last new valse.

‘By George, that would be a good one to dance to!’ he cried, playing it softly.

over, and melodiously whistling the air as an accompaniment. 'Do you dance, Miss Forde ?'

'Whenever I get a chance,' said conscientious Leo, with a smile.

'I should think so,' laughed Dick, who was waiting at home to receive the Westmorlands ; 'she is the best dancer in Norchester.'

'Ah ! Pity Westmorland doesn't dance,' said Disney, who had not yet quite recovered from the shock of hearing that Leo was engaged.

'Doesn't he ?' asked Leo, disappointedly.

'You couldn't fancy him at it, could you ? Too massive !' said Disney, laughing.

The girl drew herself up with the intention of resenting this small impertinence ; but the smiling face which the player turned to her, over his shoulder, was so

handsome and so playful that she could not resist it.

It was wonderful how quickly one became intimate with the Captain.

‘Who was the lady up at the station, to-day, who glared at you so ferociously, Miss Forde?’ he asked.

‘Was there?’ said Leo, ungrammatically.  
‘I didn’t see.’

‘A lady with a high colour and a gown to match.’

‘Mrs. Hancock!’ cried Leo. ‘I did not see her? Are you sure?’

‘Not sure that her name is Hancock, but sure that she had her eye on you. I had been watching her for some time; she came with a man who was a cross between a commercial traveller and a missionary, and saw him off by a train that left just as yours came in.’

‘Ah! That is her son! I am glad he is gone: he was dreadful. Oh, dear! dear!

Talk of an angel,' cried she, turning from the window in consternation, 'here she comes, Dick! Yes, really! And she saw me in the window, so I can't say "not at home." Oh!' as the bell rang, 'you will both stop and help me to bear it, *won't* you?'

A deep hush fell on the party, as a determined voice was heard in the passage, and in another moment Leo's neat little housemaid had announced,

'Mrs. Hancock.'

The lady rustled in, and, as Tom would have said, immediately 'spotted' the Captain who had twirled round on his music-stool, and was lightly passing a cambric hand-kerchief over his golden moustache. Her eagle eye likewise noticed the cheerful fire which burned in the grate, and Leo's sumptuous rose posy, transferred to a crystal bowl on a small table in the window.

In some mysterious way, the extreme cosiness of these three young people annoyed her.

'So, Leonora, I have come to see if you have quite got the better of your accident,' said she, deliberately seating herself.

'Are you speaking to me, Mrs. Hancock?' said Leo, innocently. 'My name is not Leonora.'

'What accident are you referring to, Mrs. Hancock?' asked Richard, affably.

'Well, I'm sure! Why, it's not more than three or four weeks since your sister was nearly burned to death,' cried the lady, indignantly.

'Oh, Mrs. Hancock, indeed I wasn't!' said Leo, laughingly. 'Let me introduce my brother's friend, Captain Disney.'

Mrs. Hancock fixed her calculating eye upon him.

'I have seen you driving nasty, dan-

gerous horses about the town,' she remarked.

'I don't know about dangerous, they were most unquestionably nasty,' smiled Edgar. 'I should have supposed a town of this size would have raised a better turn-out; but I am happy to tell you that my own mare arrived to-day, and I trust she may meet with your approval.'

'Were you staying at the "Swan"?' she went on, still persistently staring at the warrior.

'I was, till my friend Forde came back; I think you may congratulate me on having now changed my quarters for the better.'

'Ho!' said the lady, with a sniff, looking daggers at Leo. 'Do you propose a long stay in Norchester, Captain Disney?'

'I expect I shall stay as long as Miss Forde will keep me. My friend Forde

here is pretty sure he can get me permission to shoot the Hesselburgh coverts.'

'I should not be at all surprised,' said the lady, with ponderous sarcasm.

'Capital folks, the Saxons seem to be; they are a real blessing to the neighbourhood, I should think,' went on Disney, chattily; he was enjoying himself greatly. 'You know them, of course?' he added, politely.

Mrs. Hancock fairly shook with fury.

'Mrs. Saxon is not on my visiting list,' said she, with a voice and look whose acerbity is not to be described, 'and I can moreover assure you, sir, that the family in question is *not* considered an addition by the old established families round Norchester.'

'You surprise me,' said the Captain, with an air of deep interest, 'but I have always heard these out-of-the-way cathedral towns are extremely cliquy.'

'You are no gentleman,' said Mrs. Hancock, growing purple in the face, 'to say such a thing of the town in which I was born.'

'I can't help thinking I was justified,' he answered, suavely. 'You will remember that you have just, in Mr. Forde's house, made an insulting remark on the Saxons, whom you knew to be his friends; I merely followed your lead, and disparaged the town to which I believed you to be attached. I fancy we are quits.'

'Dr. Forde, do you mean to suffer me to be treated in this way on a friendly visit to yourself?'

'Certainly not, madam,' said Richard, with ponderous gravity. 'I am sure my friend will apologise; he must for the moment have forgotten that custom bestows on ladies the monopoly of making personal remarks.'

'I make my apologies, through you,

Mrs. Hancock, to the entire town of Norchester,' said Disney at once, rising and bowing to her; 'and now may I entreat you to overlook this slight unpleasantness, and give me an account of Miss Forde's accident, of which I have never heard a word.'

The expression of Mrs. Hancock's eye was still sufficiently malign to have daunted all Norchester, save and except the unregenerate three then present. Disney had made an enemy—a thing he rarely did. From that moment she sought opportunity to injure him. She knew that he had made fun of her, but she was uncertain to what extent; it was this uncertainty, as to exactly how ridiculous she appeared in his eyes, which caused her to dislike him, as, vaguely, she had always disliked Leo.

'I am glad I had the courage to speak up,' she subsequently remarked, when

detailing his outrageous behaviour to Mrs. Shorthouse. 'Anybody may know *my* opinion of the Saxons!' Of course the Fordes think themselves everything just because they know them, but I can tell them pride goes before a fall! I call this Health Mummery downright disgusting, and a disgrace to the town. Have you glanced at any of the pamphlets circulated by this Sanitary League? To put it mildly, they are most indelicate. I was obliged to lay them all on one side when Sayers was at home; one was about *tight lacing*, if you will believe me, and actually contained a drawing of—but I will not shock you with details.'

'Dear Mrs. Hancock, you surprise me; I thought the League was doing so much good; and my husband is to address the meeting,' answered the Canon's wife, who had become strangely half-hearted in her allegiance, ever since the Hesselburgh

dinner-party. ‘The Canon agrees with the Bishop that we must march with the times, and he considers Mrs. Saxon a very able woman, though peculiar—peculiar, I grant you !’

‘Oh, the whole town may turn round if it likes, and fall down and worship Mrs. Saxon, red hair, billy-cock, and all,’ said Mrs. Hancock, icily. ‘I am one who holds to her own opinion, and I repeat, I am glad I said what I did, and where I did, and I don’t care if all Norchester knows it ;’ and she assumed the air of one who feels that the eyes of the world are upon her. This, of course, was after her morning call at Minster-gate ; and it was destined to come to a very abrupt conclusion.

A ring had been heard, coupled with a knock at the door, and Leo’s cheeks had crimsoned in anticipation of the entrance of Major Westmorland.. Instead of that,

the housemaid appeared, and said to Dick,  
' You're wanted at once, sir.'

He hastily went out, and returned in  
a very few moments, saying decidedly,

' Mrs. Hancock, I am afraid we must deny  
ourselves the pleasure of a longer visit this  
afternoon. I want to speak to my sister on  
a matter of importance.'

' Most sorry to have intruded,' said the  
lady, caustically, as she rose in a tremor of  
indignation. To be literally turned out,  
without any tea being offered her, and just  
at the moment when something of great  
interest was manifestly going forward !  
' What can you expect ?' she reflected.  
' Boy and girl like that, setting up house-  
keeping ! They don't know how to behave  
themselves, of course. That insolent young  
man has no right to be staying there with-  
out a chaperon. Certainly Richard Forde  
is bent on making a match for his sister.'

If they don't catch the Major, they will have the Captain.'

The said Captain accompanied the guest downstairs, and did not hasten his return: but in a very short time Dick came hurrying down, his hat in his hand.

'Off to Hesselburgh,' he explained, 'Westmorland *père* has had a stroke. Very unlucky for poor little Leo,—cheer her up, he is sure to get on all right; tell her I'll bring the Major back with me.'

## CHAPTER II.

## HOPE'S MISSION.

Never any more,  
While I live,  
Need I hope to see his face  
As before.

R. BROWNING.

‘ Dalby Sands,  
‘ Saturday night.

‘ MY DEAR MISS MERRION,

‘ I do hope you will forgive my intruding upon your attention, but I feel sure I ought to write to you about Guy—perhaps you may have heard from Mrs. Merrion, and so know her address, and be able to send this on to her. When she

left, Guy was far from well, but she thought me over-anxious, and refused to have a doctor.

‘The journey from Eastbourne here made him much worse, and the most unsatisfactory thing is, that Mr. Humbey, the doctor here, for whom I sent at once on our arrival, does not know what is the matter with him, though he thinks seriously of the case. He wishes to have another opinion, and Mrs. Merrion is so very particular, I am really afraid to telegraph to London on my own responsibility. To-day Wilfred also seemed unwell, and, at my wits’ end, I write to beg you to send a telegram authorizing me to send for Dr. Rankin Gardner, and also, if possible, let me know Mrs. Merrion’s address. She promised to send it at once on arriving, but they have been gone a week, and I have not heard. I hope this is intelligible; I am so disturbed, I scarcely know what I write. You are

always so kind, I turn instinctively to you in my trouble.

‘ I am

‘ Most sincerely yours,

‘ MABEL THORPE.’

Hope began to read this letter listlessly.

It was two days since her accident. The first she had spent in bed, to-day she was up and dressed, but still on the sofa in her room.

She was very little the worse, it seemed, for her mischance. The day in bed had taken away the pains in her limbs, and though still stiff, and with one cheek much discoloured by a bad bruise, she was whole and sound, and had not even a cold. In fact, she had been obliged to plead more fatigue than she felt, as an excuse for remaining upstairs : to go down and face Gilbert Greville and Tom had been, for

some occult reason, impossible. She felt that her own room was her only refuge, until she left Leaming, which she intended to do as soon as she could.

She had yesterday despatched a letter to Ireland, begging Lady Caroline Loftus to let her come to her on a long visit; but Mabel Thorpe's letter cut the knot of her difficulties at once.

In the desolation of her heart, it was sweet, with a sweetness hard to analyse, to feel that somebody wanted her, and was sending for her. Miss Merrion, the heiress, rich and admired, felt strangely friendless and forsaken.

True, there was Gilbert Greville downstairs, awaiting only her word: ready, at her slightest signal, to give her everything he had, or was. Ah, but what a vast return he expected to such seeming generosity! He would want no less than herself, body and soul. She could not give him that.

Why not? She did not know—only she felt that it was impossible.

She was really far more exhausted than she herself guessed. Some strange excitement was possessing her, and giving her a fictitious energy.

She had scarcely slept at all, since she left the huts of the charcoal-burners: it seemed to her that she no longer needed sleep—as if the only thing worth doing were to live over and over again in thought the incidents of the last few days; and all the time she seriously told herself that she was doing her best to forget it all.

This letter, mercifully for her, gave a new turn to her thoughts, and drew them from herself. Here was work for her—here was a direct call

As soon as she had grasped the sense of it, she rang the bell for her maid: as she did so, her eye fell on the date of the letter, and to her horror she found that it

was three days back. Glancing at the address, she saw that it had been sent to Hesselburgh and forwarded thence.

‘Ask Mr. Lyster if he will be so extremely kind as to come up here and see me,’ cried she, when her summons was answered.

Mollie came at once, laden with grapes and peaches.

‘My dear, I am so pleased you are looking so well!’ he cried, affectionately.

‘Oh, yes, Mollie, I am quite well—quite! And I have had such a letter! My brother’s children are so ill, and my sister-in-law has gone off abroad leaving them with a young governess, and I must go to them at once! Is there a train to London I could catch to-day?’

‘My dear! Train! London! To-day!’ he cried.

‘Oh, Mollie, I must! Indeed I must! See here! She asks me to telegraph, and I ought to have had the letter yesterday!

She will think I am as heartless and unfeeling as the rest ! She will not know what to do !'

Mollie took the letter from her, and mastered its contents.

' You are not fit to travel, dear,' he said at last.

' I shall fret myself into a fever if I am not doing something at once ! Indeed I shall ! Poor Guy ! He is such a darling !'

' Here comes Muriel—let us hear her,' said Mollie, as Miss Saxon walked in.

' I know she will judge as I do !' cried Hope, eagerly. ' And I am quite well—what is the matter with me ? I have no disease ! The worst that could befall would be a little fatigue, and Bowen is with me to take care of me !' She was working herself up into a state of great excitement.

' I will go and get Bradshaw,' said Mollie, meekly.

‘I have just had a telegram from mother,’ said Muriel, as soon as they were alone, ‘saying we are to go back directly, to help her over this horrid Sanitary League. I suppose you won’t come, because of Captain Disney?’

‘Certainly not; I could not possibly!’ cried poor Hope, the crimson flaming into her small pale face. ‘Not for anything could I go to Hesselburgh now, Murie! And of course I can’t stay here without you, so that settles it.’

‘I could easily telegraph the *mater* that you were bad, and that I could not leave you——’

‘Oh, that would be nonsense! I am not ill.’

She sprang up and walked about the room.

‘Ill! No such thing,’ she cried; ‘and, besides, I am in such a state of mind about Guy.’

‘I should think,’ slowly pronounced Muriel, ‘that perhaps you had better go.’

‘There is no question about it—I must,’ again cried Hope. ‘Oh, Murie, Murie! I have made such a mess of things in general. I told you once, at Hesselburgh, that I did not want to die. I—believe—I—half think—I have changed my mind!’

‘What nonsense, Hope! If you talk like that, I shall really think you ought not to travel.’

Hope was silent, leaning her flushed cheek against her sofa-pillow.

Mollie re-entered.

‘There is a train at half-past two,’ he said, ‘which will get you to London at eight o’clock. Change at Brereley, of course. You will have to sleep at the Great Northern Hotel, and go to Dalby next morning.’

‘Why not to-night?’

‘The only train you could catch would

be such a late one. You see, you must drive from King's Cross to Victoria, and you could not get anything earlier than the 9.40. You would not be there before midnight.'

'I must see,' said Hope, hurriedly, 'about that. Perhaps it would be better not to keep them up. But oh! I shall be so impatient until I am there.'

'You must bestir yourself with your packing,' he said, 'for you ought to start in an hour-and-a-quarter from now. Hey, Muriel, do you think it prudent?'

'I think perhaps, on the whole, she had better go, Mollie. Of course she must have a carriage to herself, and then she can lie down all the way: and Bowen is very good and clever at travelling.'

'You will not be able to take leave of Tom and Greville, they are shooting,' said Mollie.

'It cannot be helped,' replied Hope, heaving an inward sigh of relief.

'Well, I had better order the carriage and an early luncheon,' said Mollie; 'but in my opinion you had better not go, my dear.'

He might as well have told the cutting, chill wind outside that, in his opinion, it ought not to blow. Hope was quite determined. He left them to make all necessary preparations.

Muriel put Hope on the sofa, sternly forbidding any exertion, and Bowen and she, in three-quarters-of-an-hour, had finished everything. Then, when she had despatched the maid to have some dinner, Muriel asked, with an odd little smile,

'What am I to say to Mr. Greville when you are gone?'

'Oh, I don't know! Anything you like that will prevent his following me! These

unattached men are dreadful—they can follow you about from place to place.'

Muriel sat down on the sofa beside her friend, placing her arm round her—a most rare manifestation of attachment on her part.

'Hope,' said she, in her soft, even way, 'is that quite genuine? Don't you care for him? Or is it that you are upset, and not very well, and would like things to stand over for a little?'

There was a silence before Hope answered; then her voice was quite firm and decided.

'I think I shall never marry him, Murie. Certainly not for years and years to come. I will not be so unwise as to take vows of celibacy: at the present moment it seems impossible that I should marry: I know that just now my feelings are exaggerated; but I have a deep conviction that months hence, when I have

settled down again, I shall feel the same as regards marriage with anyone.'

She paused : Muriel, feeling that more was to come, said nothing, but drew her a little closer.

'I was wrong to engage myself to Mr. Disney,' said Hope, continuing, 'but I almost think I have been punished enough.' . . . A gathering emotion made her hesitate, to steady her voice. 'You must not think,' said she then, 'anything that is—that is sentimental, or—or—foolish, if I say something.'

'I shall understand,' said Muriel, simply.

'It is hard to say, but it amounts to this. He . . . Major Westmorland'—she spoke the name firmly—'is a man whose judgment I respect. He is a man with a lofty ideal: not like—other people. I should have been proud of his good opinion, glad to think that he liked me. Because of that Disney affair—he despised

me. To be despised is worse than to be hated—Browning says so—oh ! many degrees worse ! . . . Ah, well ! ' she rose, and went to the dressing-table, ' it is over now ; but somehow I feel quite different,'—she looked round as if even the room she stood in had altered its aspect in her eyes. ' It is hard to understand what can have happened exactly to change me so : there does not seem reason enough, does there ? I cannot quite unravel it ; but, Muriel, I *am* changed.'

' Yes,' said Muriel, ' you are ;' and her eyes had tears in them.

' After I broke it off with Edgar,' went on Hope, reflectively, ' I was very unhappy. But I knew I had made a mistake, and I looked forward to getting over it, enjoying life again, having all my pleasures as I used to do. Now . . . it is all quite different : I feel so beaten down——'

She stopped very suddenly, standing

still, with her hands wrung together, and Muriel feared she was going to break down. However, she recovered herself, in a grave, patient manner which was heroic in its way, and, after a very short silence, added, in her usual voice,

‘And so I believe it must be time to leave off thinking about myself, and give my mind to other people: the children, for instance.’

‘Yes,’ replied Muriel, tenderly, ‘I am glad you are going to the children.’

Crossing the room to her side, Hope bent down and kissed her.

‘You are good to me,’ she said.

‘I love you,’ replied Muriel, quietly.

‘Well,’ said Hope, after a short interval, ‘I suppose we ought to go downstairs.’

‘Yes.’ Muriel rose, and furtively wiped away a couple of tears. ‘Mind you write to me, Hope; we all go to Scotland the day after this Sanitary League function.’

Hope gave the required promise; and, as they were descending the staircase together, Muriel remarked,

‘I think, on the whole, it will not be wise to raise Mr. Greville’s hopes too high.’

A drizzle of rain set in as Mr. Lyster and Muriel, with their young guest, seated themselves in the brougham.

‘The sky is shedding tears,’ said Muriel, ‘because our nice party is broken up and gone. I wonder how they all got on yesterday, and what Mr. Westmorland will think of the match! ’

‘Muriel,’ said Mollie, gravely, ‘in my humble opinion that’s a pity, and though I hope I am not inhospitable, I must confess I am sorry I invited Miss Forde here, sorry it should have happened under my roof. She is too young. In my opinion, marriage is for men and women, not for girls and boys, who never stop to consider

their responsibilities. I must say I am disappointed in Major Westmorland, I thought he had more sense.'

Muriel hesitated how to answer him; for she guessed that the subject was painful to Hope. At last she said,

'I have no doubt he will make her happy. I only wonder if she will do the same for him. She does not understand him, in the very least.'

Hope nerved herself to make a remark.

'There is a wonderful kind of intuition,' said she, 'which in a case of love seems almost to take the place of reason in a woman: she does and says what pleases, hardly knowing that she does so; and the man is just as well satisfied.'

'Some men,' said Muriel, 'perhaps. But I have noticed that, in cases where a man, a maturely developed man like the Major, marries a pretty little girl, they

seem to fall apart so much afterwards. You remember the Melton marriage, Mollie.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Lyster, thoughtfully, 'but it is hard to define a limit of age exactly. Now you, Murie, are only a year or so older than Leone Forde. But you have been taught to think; your mother has encouraged you to exercise your judgment. I am certain that, if you accepted a man, it would be because he was your deliberate choice; with that pretty child, I cannot help feeling that it is merely a case of her first offer.'

'Oh, most probably,' said Muriel; she could not add her own deliberate conviction that, not only was the Major not in love with Leone, but that he was in love with someone else.

Mollie rubbed his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief, a thing he frequently

did when bothered ; then he bestirred himself, and cried, cheerily,

‘ Come, let us change the subject. We must not send off our Hope in bad spirits. I daresay it will all come right ! We must not be depressed, or we shall despatch her in a melancholy frame of mind, which will never do, with such a long journey before her ! I hope you will find the patient much better, my dear child. What a comfort to the young governess to have you with her ! A charming letter she writes, I think she must be a nice girl.’

‘ I admire her as sincerely as any girl I know,’ replied Hope ; and then, partly to make conversation, and partly because the subject filled her with a real sympathy, and she knew the kind-heartedness of her listener, she told the story of Mabel Thorpe’s love affair, and of her patient courage.

Hope could be eloquent when she pleased; an eloquence, perhaps, more of eye and voice than of tongue. Mr. Lyster fastened upon the story with keenly awakened interest.

‘Dear, dear!’ he said, when it was finished, ‘now, can’t we do something here? Is there nothing to be done to help them? Poor young things! what a touching story.’

He was lost in thought for a few minutes, and Hope recalled Mr. Greville’s suggestion that she should apply to Major Westmorland.

‘I have an idea, Hope,’ suddenly said Mollie. ‘It is not very brilliant, but still it is an idea and it is this. As you remarked last Sunday, poor old Mr. Wetherell is failing terribly. I have promised him a curate before winter, for he is quite unequal to getting about in the bad weather; he has never been himself

since Nellie's death ;' and the kind little man sighed.

' Now, my idea,' he went on, ' was that the curate should rent the little stone cottage in the park, with the roses on the porch. But now the thought simmering in my brain is this : suppose I gave Arthur Strange the cottage, rent free, and two hundred and fifty pounds a year, do you think the young couple would marry on that, if he had the promise of the living when poor old Wetherell goes ?'

Hope cried out with pleasure and astonishment.

' It wouldn't do if he is an ambitious man,' said Mollie, thoughtfully, ' for the place is—you see what it is, even in summer, and it is terribly lonely in winter. But the air is fine, the work is light, and that is a pretty cottage, my dear. A good garden, and pasture to keep a cow, if they liked. The living is worth four hundred

and fifty pounds—which is large, you know, for such a small village.'

'They would think it Paradise!' cried Hope, her face aglow, her hands clasped.

'We mustn't be too precipitate,' said Mollie, 'I must see Wetherell first, for I must not foist upon him a curate he does not take to. But he will be sure to sympathise with a governess: poor Nellie was a governess, you know! Then, the thing to do will be to get young Strange down here and have a talk with him. Do you know his address?'

'Yes—oh, yes!'

'Well then, Hope, you write it down here for me, and I will communicate with him direct. Don't say a word about it to the poor girl, in case it can't be arranged after all. I will write to you as soon as anything is settled, you know.'

Hope was quite overcome.

'Mollie,' she said, unsteadily, 'if this

can be done it will be, I think, the greatest kindness you ever did in your life. If I am the means, even so indirectly, of helping Mabel Thorpe, I shall feel that I have not lived utterly for myself—that there does exist one human being who has been helped through me !'

## CHAPTER III.

## I FEEL AS IF I SHOULD BE GLAD TO DIE.

God answers some prayers sharp and suddenly,  
And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face,  
A gauntlet with a gift in't; every wish  
Is like a prayer with God.

*Aurora Leigh.*

‘AM I to give her this?’ asked the neatly-attired hospital-nurse, placing a telegram in the hands of Dr. Humbey.

He took it, with knit brows, and read :

‘*Send at once for physician, nurses, anything you require. Shall be with you to-night about eleven.—Hope Merrion.*’

‘Is that the mother?’ he asked.

‘I think not. Little Adeline says it is her aunt. If she is an experienced person it would be a great relief to have her.’

The doctor looked perplexed.

‘Suppose she has never had it?’ he suggested; ‘she ought not to come into the house until we know.’

‘How will you stop her? There is no address to this. Handed in at the Leaming Road office. Have you the least idea where Leaming Road is?’

Dr. Humbey shook his head, adding,

‘If I had, it would not be much use, for Mrs. or Miss Merrion has, in all probability, left there by now.’

‘Well, I must go back to my patient,’ replied Nurse White. ‘I leave you to do as you think best about it, but I shall not rouse Miss Thorpe to speak to her upon the subject; if she asks any question, then I shall tell her.’

‘That will be the best way. I will be

here to-night, meet this lady at the door, and explain the circumstances.'

It was nearly half-past eleven that night, before the station fly, containing Hope, her maid, and her luggage, drove up to Sea View Parade.

The long journey had naturally tired her, but she was not as worn out as Bowen expected she would be. The idea of coming to the children, of being of use, was keeping her up.

Directly the fly stopped, the door opened, and an elderly gentleman appeared on the threshold, came out, and approached the window, where Hope looked eagerly forth.

'Dear me!' exclaimed he, in irrepressible surprise at her youthful appearance.  
'Are you Miss Merrion?'

'Yes, yes! And you? The doctor? Oh, is he very ill?' cried she, in great agitation.

He looked pityingly at her.

‘I must not let you come into the house, indeed,’ he said. ‘It is scarlet fever.’

‘Oh, miss!’ cried Bowen, clutching her from behind, as if to keep her from rushing into infection.

‘Scarlet fever!’ cried Hope. ‘Oh, but that does not matter! I have had it! Poor little boy, how is he?’

‘I hope out of danger now; but Wilfred has it, and Miss Thorpe is quite prostrated.’

‘Miss Thorpe!’

‘She sickened two days ago, but would not give in until we thought Guy was safe. I have been obliged, in the absence of any orders, to take a good deal upon myself. I telegraphed last night for a nurse.’

‘That was right,’ faintly said Hope, feeling overwhelmed. ‘I am very grateful. Now Bowen and I can help. Bowen

is a very good nurse. Is there room for us?’

‘In the house? Oh, yes. The other lodgers of course decamped, when they heard what it was——’

‘But Miss Merrion!’ cried Bowen, ‘are you sure you have had the fever?’

‘Yes, quite sure,’ repeated Hope, vehemently. ‘All children have it, of course I had it. Let me come in at once; and please see to the luggage, Bowen. Has nothing been heard from Mrs. Merrion?’ she asked, as she hastened into the house.

‘Miss Merrion, are you quite sure you do right to come here?’ said the doctor.

‘Why, certainly,’ she cried, ‘I must come! What a wretch I should be to go away and leave them! Besides, I don’t want to knock up the hotel people at this unearthly hour. I am afraid it is very inconvenient and very thoughtless of me

to arrive at such a time—so late; but as I telegraphed I hoped they would have prepared. I never dreamed that Miss Thorpe would be ill.'

'Poor girl, she was so worn out with anxiety and nursing that I am afraid it will go hard with her,' said Dr. Humbey, pityingly, with an admiring gaze at the new arrival, as she sank into an arm-chair and pulled off her gloves.

He then proceeded to give an outline of events.

Guy's illness had been what is known among doctors as suppressed scarlet fever, that is to say, scarlet fever without the usual accompaniments of sore throat and red rash. Had any practised doctor seen him when he was first ill, he would have known what it must be; but Dr. Humbey, who did not see him until his railway journey had given him a chill and he was suffering from congested lungs, was un-

certain, though, from what he was told, he guessed accurately what complaint he had to deal with.

Before the arrival of the London physician, the doctor's conclusion had been proved by the sickening of Wilfred, with all the recognised symptoms. The whole of the day after Mabel Thorpe despatched her imploring letter to Hope, Guy had lain at the gate of death. The responsibility had been terrible. Nobody knew how to communicate with any of the child's relations. Late at night, his delirious ravings, growing gradually feebler, subsided into stupor, and this stupor, by-and-by changing its character, seemed to become a natural sleep.

All through the night, with every nerve strained, Miss Thorpe watched for his waking—the waking on which hung life or death. But still the child slept on, and was sleeping when Dr. Humbey came after

breakfast. He sat down by the bed and watched too, and at about eleven Guy stirred.

‘It was pitiful to see that girl’s face,’ said the doctor. ‘Some women have the mother instinct so strong in them—if it had been her own boy, she could scarcely have felt it more. I had told her that, if he was sensible when he woke, he would in all probability pull through. So he tossed about a bit, and opened those great eyes of his, and he saw Torpie, as they call her, standing by the bed. He looked reflectively at her, a bit of a thing, with the breath almost out of his body, and an expression in his eyes as if he were half in heaven already; and, “I say, Torpie dear,” says he, as cool as you please, “I hope my crab’s not dead?” The revulsion of feeling was too much for her. His green, sandy crab, that he kept in a bucket of salt water! I had seen her crying her

heart out over the rubbish the night before as she fed it ; everything the little scamp had touched seemed sacred. To hear him calling out for it as if nothing had happened was more than she could bear. She just managed to gasp out, " It's alive—I'll bring it ;" then away she ran, and fell like a stone on the landing. I picked her up, made her go to bed, and sent for Nurse White. She's the right kind of woman, and no mistake.'

' Is she very ill ?' asked Hope.

' I am afraid so,' he replied, reluctantly.

' The first thing I must do,' said she, ' is to let her mother know.'

' Certainly, her mother should be told. She need not come—at present. But warn her to be ready in case of a summons.'

' Oh !' cried Hope, ' is it as bad as that ? What can my sister be about to send no address ? Why, all her children might be burned to death, and she would not know

it! She has been gone more than a week. However, she would be no use here. She is better away, after all.'

Bowen here entered the room.

' If you please, miss, I have taken a cup of soup to your room, and you must go to bed at once, as I am sure the doctor would tell you, if you wish to be of any use to-morrow.'

Hope rose.

' I will go: I will do whatever you tell me, so that you allow me to think I am being of use,' cried she.

And so engrossing was this new atmosphere of anxiety and care in which she found herself, that her own thoughts and her own sorrows sank away into insignificance, and that night, for the first time since Evelyn refused to take her hand, she slept soundly.

The next few days were indeed full ones for her. Into them so many emotions

crowded that life seemed to her a different, a deeper thing than she had ever believed it. It was a life of complete isolation, for they knew nobody in Dalby Sands. Moreover, whatever acquaintance they might have had there, would of course have shunned the stricken house. On consideration, Hope had decided not to say anything of the scarlet fever to her friends at Hesselburgh, partly because she knew that infection may be conveyed in a letter. She merely telegraphed the news of her safe arrival, and Muriel was, during the next few days, so busy with the Women's Sanitary League that she had no time to write; and, when that was over, the Saxons went to their father's relations in Scotland, and Evelyn took his paralysed father home to Feverell Chase.

The very day after Hope's arrival, came a short note from Bertha. They were having a very enjoyable trip, said she,

writing from Nürnberg. For the next week their movements would be uncertain —they would be in small villages in the Bavarian Tyrol, but, a week hence, letters would find them at Salzburg.

Hope immediately telegraphed to Nürnberg, but the Merrions had left before the message arrived, and they did not receive it. She was obliged to content herself with writing a letter to her sister-in-law, couched in no measured terms: a letter which Mrs. Frederic Merrion never either forgot or forgave.

As little Adeline had been so long exposed to the infection before the danger was discovered, the doctor, believing that she must certainly take the fever, did not send her away, but kept her isolated from the others, with her nurse to look after her, and so far she had not sickened.

Still, the three separate sick-rooms entailed a large amount of care and nursing;

for Guy, as yet, was too weak to bear the clamour of Wilfred, who had taken the complaint in its mildest form, and required a firm hand to keep him in bed. The nursery-maid, who had had scarlet fever only a few years back, and so was not afraid of it, found herself quite unable to cope with him. Bowen, however, ruled him with a rod of iron, so deputing to Hope the, at present, comparatively easy task of sitting by Guy's bed, and leaving Nurse White free to devote all her attention to Miss Thorpe, who was seriously ill.

Bowen was a cool, practical woman, with an eye to the main chance; her one redeeming tenderness was her devotion to her mistress. Hope was of that fast disappearing class of people who possess the art of attaching to themselves all those of a lower order with whom they come in contact. Bowen's last mistress had often

reflected how rich her maid must be growing on her perquisites: this very same maid would not have stolen a shoe-lace from Hope; in her service she would cheerfully undertake what in another situation she would have flatly declined to attempt. It was Hope who had got Bowen's consumptive niece into the Ventnor hospital, and obtained for her brother that excellent place as groom. Hope knew about, and sympathized with, all the private hopes and fears of the reserved woman, and never forgot to ask after the delicate sister-in-law, or the progress of the young niece for whose dressmaking apprenticeship her maid was paying. Consequently, she was waited upon, hand and foot, and now was suffered to feel no slightest inconvenience from the rudimentary nature of lodging-house cookery, nor the scantiness of lodging-house jugs of tepid water, for purposes of ablution.

Bowen was greatly astonished, the first day of their stay at Sea View Parade, to find how energetic and well Miss Merrion seemed ; she did not make allowance for the stimulus of this new excitement. On that day, Mabel Thorpe seemed stronger, and, on her asking whether any news had been heard from Mrs. Merrion, was told that Miss Merrion had come. She was at first distressed, murmuring that Miss Merrion would take the fever, but after a while seemed relieved, and asked to see her.

Her enquiries were all for the children, and she passed lightly over her illness, only saying miserably that it was very unfortunate that she should be useless at such a time, but that she meant soon to be well again. She asked if her mother knew of her illness and begged earnestly that nothing might be said to alarm her, as the journey was so long and so expensive.

‘I shall be much easier about Guy and Wilf now that you are here,’ she said. ‘But mind you do not overdo it, I don’t think you look at all well.’

‘Oh—I am well! Don’t fear for me,’ Hope answered, brightly.

The next day Mabel Thorpe was worse; on the morning of the next the doctor telegraphed for her mother.

Hope sat with her the afternoon of this day, while Nurse White got some sleep. The girl was delirious, though not violently so. She knew no one, but was quiet for the most part; when she spoke, it was to address Arthur Strange, whom she imagined to be present, or to say a prayer.

A nature so high and so strong was revealed, both in her prayers and in what she said to the man she loved, that the listening Hope hung her head in deep humiliation. When she thought of this

girl's life of self-sacrifice, of the purity and nobleness of her attachment, her own life seemed so gay and trivial, her brief engagement such a mockery of what love really is. The silent tears rolled down her cheeks at the faint accents of the brave voice, repeating the words with which no doubt she had often, both by letter and by voice, cheered the drooping hopes of her betrothed.

'They also serve, who only stand and wait,' she said, over and over again. 'It is the waiting which is the hard part, isn't it, dearest? And it has been a long time . . . . It is hard to see each other so seldom . . . . but we are young and strong, and think how much happier we are than if we had never known each other;' and then, sharply, with an indescribable pang in her voice, 'Oh, Arthur, I can't bear to see you cry!'

Hope, hiding her face, felt as if she ought

not to enter into this Holy of Holies. Her heart was torn for thinking of the many, many English girls whose lives resembled that of Mabel. This hopeless poverty, this iron fate which made a strong man weep, how bitterly sad a thing it was.

Hope felt as if she loathed herself, as if her own luxurious existence and easily gratified desires were an insult to the girl by whose bedside she sat.

What if Mabel should die—should perish at her post for the sake of these children, and leave her Arthur desolate ?

‘She would be more sincerely mourned than I should,’ bitterly thought Hope. ‘Of what use am I in this world ? and the only good man I know despises me. It would be better for me to die, and for her to live, and then Mollie could help Arthur Strange, and they would marry, and ah ! how happy they would be ! But what use is it to think of such a thing ? The

fever would not accept me as a substitute. If it would, I feel as if I should be glad to die—to give my useless life for her precious one !'

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE MAJOR'S MOTIVE.

I swear I do not love him. Did I, once ?  
. . . . . Did I indeed  
Love once : or did I only worship ? Yes,  
Perhaps, O friend, I set you up so high  
I haply set you above love itself,  
And out of reach of these poor woman's arms.

E. B. BROWNING.

AFTER all, sunshine did smile on the mon-  
ster meeting of the Women's Sanitary  
League. A cold, autumnal sunshine,  
frosty in its character, and accompanied  
by a somewhat boisterous breeze, but still  
sunshine, which animated the scene, and

danced on the tossing flags which surmounted the tents.

The whole of Norchester was there. Not one of the Minster clergy was absent, from the bishop himself, roguish and genial, dishevelled as to his hair, and secular as to his attire, to the most minor of the minor canons, a young man fresh from Cambridge, with a rooted belief that music in church and plenty of it was the foundation of the Catholic religion, and that his own tenor voice was the finest in England.

There were the county people, exceedingly dowdy for the most part, but fairly intelligent, and approving the entertainment as a whole, except when they found some new, money-made family seated in a more convenient or prominent position than themselves at one of the lectures. There was the army of ladies of whom Mrs. Hancock was more or less typical, who, never having attended such a meeting be-

fore, were all sure it must be wrong, but were present in order to be shocked at the depravity of the generation ; there were the personal friends of the Saxons, differing widely as to type, some being fashionable, some scientific, many given over wholly and utterly to fads. Several stars of the Royal Institution were among them, discussing technical matters concerning household sanitation, and reason as applied to dress, in a manner which seemed utterly shameless to the Hancock faction, who would have liked to put a shawl over the beautiful copy of the Milo Venus which Mrs. Saxon had arranged in a bower of roses just before the platform.

The bishop opened the proceedings in the gayest possible manner, putting everyone in a good humour to start with, and going on to enforce his point with several choice and carefully selected anecdotes, which so charmed the people that, by the

time his melodious voice ceased, most of the audience were feeling that Norchester was painfully behind the age, and that it was high time that such a movement was set on foot, before the other towns of England discovered its deficiencies: for the bishop seemed to think that, if only his diocese would condescend to try, it could easily distance any other diocese in the matter of health, or of anything else; so, of course, an effort was worth while, if only to show other people how to do the thing properly.

Dr. Compton, of the London Health League, followed the bishop, with a fierce torrent of Irish rhetoric. He frightened his hearers out of their wits by the awful vividness of his details. Vaguely they all wondered how anybody ever managed to be born, much less to arrive at maturity, during the preceding centuries, in face of the ghastly tissue of horrors now brought

to their notice. Ignorant nurses, ignorant doctors, fœtid air, and malarial water, poisonous food, murderous clothing, and a mode of living which rendered life impossible, seemed to have surrounded these unhappy generations from their birth. Would those listening to the speaker allow their children to suffer so? Would they not at once insist on their discarding their under-linen, wearing boots too large for them, abjuring pastry, subscribing to the League, and taking other methods to ensure their physical salvation, whence, as a matter of course, must result their spiritual salvation also?

Just as the nervous audience were fancying that the Black Death must be hovering over Norchester, and that noxious exhalations were rising from the very ground beneath them, the orator, having made his point, abruptly ceased, and the chairman announced that an hour would

elapse before the next speaker began, which time their host and hostess hoped they would spend in partaking of refreshments and inspecting the exhibits.

Accordingly, a general move was made, and, after a little crushing, people found themselves once more in the open air, where a perfect Babel of voices broke out ; conspicuous among which were the accents of a wild-looking German doctor, who had come to England with the special object of preaching his new health gospel, namely, the terrible danger of feeding babies on milk. Water, he had discovered, was their only natural diet. As he could not speak a word of English a great deal of his eloquence was lost. He ran from group to group, piteously asking if nobody spoke *Deutsch*.

‘ I feel convinced that I am all over germs,’ whispered Disney to Leo Forde, as they emerged together into the sunshine.

‘ My flesh positively creeps, and I dare not breathe for fear of imbibing poison. Shall we venture on a cup of tea? Have you courage? I think, as it is Mrs. Saxon’s *ménage*, we may feel tolerably certain that the water has been filtered, the milk tested, the tea poured away from the leaves, and the cream not artificially preserved. But think it over calmly! Think what risks we run every time we drink a cup of tea! I am sure it is a wonder that any of us are alive to tell the tale.’

‘ I don’t like it ; it makes me feel rather sick,’ said Leo, languidly, ‘ It is all very well for sanitary inspectors to understand this kind of thing, but I don’t see why we should have it crammed down our throats.’

‘ A feature of the age,’ replied Disney, easily. ‘ Everybody ought to know everything, that’s the theory. I can’t undertake to say whether it is right or wrong. Let

us go and forget our cares in the refreshment-room ; fortunately Mrs. Saxon's ideas of hygiene don't seem to have got so far as zoedone !'

'Wait a moment, please,' said the girl, pausing, with a sudden change sweeping over her face. 'I see Evelyn, he is looking for me.'

'What !' said Disney, 'has the poor fellow actually got leave of absence from the sick-room to come and mingle with the festive throng for five minutes ? Jove, what a martyrdom that man's life is. I wonder why he submits to it ?'

'I think he likes it,' said Evelyn's betrothed, with a touch of bitterness which did not escape her hearer ; 'he cares more for his father than for anyone else, I believe.'

As she spoke, Westmorland, who had been looking round in a wistful way, caught

sight of her, and began threading his way through the crowd towards her.

Disney fell back a step or two, curiously scanning the faces of both.

Leone was looking splendid. She was well-dressed, for this was her first appearance in public as the promised wife of the heir of Feverell Chase. Scarcely a soul in the great marquee but had been watching her as she sat between her brother and her brother's friend; scarcely a soul but had remarked that her lover was not present.

Most people knew of Mr. Westmorland's paralytic stroke; it was generally attributed to the mortification and rage consequent upon his son's unsuitable engagement. Mrs. Saxon might have felt considerably cast down, had she known to what an extent interest in Leo divided the honours of the day with the interest in domestic sanitation.

A large crowd certainly gathered round Miss Dinwiddie as she personally conducted a tour of inspection round the impromptu hospital, but a very considerable number hung about on the lawn, and watched the meeting of the Major and Miss Forde with greedy eyes. He looked very ill in the gay sunshine, though he smiled as he drew near the motionless girl.

‘I am so sorry I missed you,’ he said, as he raised his hat and touched her hand. ‘I waited about the door of the lecture marquee to catch you as you went in; but I blundered, I suppose.’

‘I wish you had caught me,’ she said, with an effort after her old liveliness, ‘you would have spared me a most terrible quarter-of-an-hour. I have learned that my days are numbered unless I at once begin to wear clothes of a totally different cut and material. I have been slowly committing suicide ever since I was a

babv, without knowing it. Are you not horrified ?'

' Worse than that,' chimed in Disney, ' she has been poisoning herself in small doses by the use—the habitual use, as I understand—of that diabolical article, a tea-cosy.'

' Most serious,' replied Evelyn, with a ghost of the smile with which he had been wont to reward Leo's nonsense, ' but can you spare me a few minutes now? My father would like—would be so pleased—will you come with me and see him ?'

' Oh . . . certainly. Of course,' she answercd, in a voice audibly deficient in heartiness. ' Captain Disney, you must drink zoedone without me.'

' I shall be able to tell you what it tastes like,' he replied, moving off with a parting salutation and a laugh which ended in a sigh.

In the refreshment-tent he came upon

Richard, who was making himself a most efficient *aide-de-camp* to Mrs. Saxon in the way of handing about fruit, ices, cakes, sandwiches, champagne, etc. Into this task Edgar threw himself with vigour, and made himself, as usual, most popular with the ladies, unblushingly claiming acquaintance with Mrs. Hancock, and re-filling her glass so assiduously that she felt it more and more of an effort to continue to maintain her hostile attitude against him.

But when at last the edge of the Norchester appetite seemed to be growing blunted, he went up to Richard, and, lightly flicking crumbs from his fashionably cased legs with his handkerchief, he said, in a low voice,

‘Dick—what on earth is wrong with Westmorland?’

Forde started, raising his eyes apprehensively to his friend; then, turning to the

buffet, he took a sandwich, slowly consuming a mouthful before he asked,

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean,’ returned Edgar, selecting a peach, ‘that something is jolly wrong with him. If I didn’t know the man too well, I would say he had a crime on his conscience.’

‘He has seemed to me out of spirits,’ said Dick, very reluctantly.

It is always disagreeable to have one’s own misgivings put into words by somebody else.

‘Out of spirits! He is simply not fit to speak to! Now he always was of the quiet sort, but as sociable and pleasant a fellow as you would wish to meet. Just now, by all precedent, he ought to be in topping spirits, engaged to as lovely a girl as there is in the county.’

‘You think so too? I have thought—

it has dawned upon me lately that she is pretty,' said Dick, thoughtfully.

'In two years she will be a beauty,' asserted Disney, with conviction.

'As you say, it is strange. To tell you the honest truth, it has bothered me the last few days. While his father was so bad, he never seemed to think of her—scarcely sent her a message; then—this sounds trivial, but girls think of these things—he has given her nothing, not even a ring.'

'I imagine the father is at the bottom of it: cantankerous, eh?'

'He is always cantankerous.'

'Ah, yes! Doesn't approve! As he leads Westmorland by the nose, I think that is really enough to give the origin of his gloom.'

'You are utterly mistaken. Mr. Westmorland is most delighted with the match—frantically, disproportionately so! No,

the motive is deeper than that. Once or twice I have feared that I knew it.'

'Feared?'

Richard set down his glass, glanced round the fast-emptying tent, then at his companion, and drew out his pocket-book.

'It's not very long ago since Westmorland consulted me about a curious matter,' he said. 'I wonder if I dare tell you?'

'Of course,' said Disney, self-denyingly, 'I don't want to hear anything that's a breach of confidence.'

'I was not asked to keep it dark,' returned Forde; 'and, to tell you the truth, I should be glad to have somebody's opinion on the subject.' He drew from his pocket-book a folded paper. 'Read this, and I will explain to you what it is supposed to mean,' he said. 'It is, as far as can be discovered, an authentic utterance,

dating back indisputably to the fourteenth century, and very likely older still.'

Disney took it, and read it through.

'I should say that to call that nonsense was putting the case too mildly,' he said, gravely. 'It seems to me confusion worse confounded.'

Dick explained the situation, and gave the interpretation, according to Mr. Westmorland.

'I see,' at last said the Captain, slowly. 'The old man believes, on the authority of this piece of rubbish, that his race will become extinct unless Evelyn marries before next first of March! Well, why shouldn't it become extinct? Old races usually do; it's a way they have: and I suppose Miss Dinwiddie and her physiological ladies could tell us why. H'm! Then I suppose you think that pressure was put upon the Major to induce him to

hurry into an engagement before he really knew what he was about? But, my good sir, the man who was *not* in love with your sister would be a very clod! Surely that cannot be the whole reason of this settled gloom?’

A red spot was burning in Dick’s cheeks, and his eyes were bright with excitement.

‘It’s what I don’t like to think of Westmorland,’ he said, angrily, ‘but it looks to me like it. He is a man of exaggerated conscientiousness: the feeling of having practised more or less of a deception would be quite enough to put him into this remarkable state of mind. But he had better be careful. My sister has a brother; as he would soon find out, if he tried any nonsense. I won’t have her humiliated before the whole of Norchester.’

Disney looked attentively at him, and seemed to reflect.

‘ You would not let her marry a man who did not care for her? You would not throw her away?’ he said at last.

‘ Ah, but—But—Suppose she cares for him?’ blurted out poor Dick.

‘ Oh I see,’ replied the Captain, with due gravity; but as he spoke he glanced in a large mirror near, and passed his hand over his fine moustache to hide a suspicious curving of the lips; and some inward feeling caused his pulses to beat, and his blood to warm. The idea of Miss Forde’s woes, it would appear, did not afflict him very profoundly.

The mirror showed him more than the reflection of his own goodly self; it painted the door of the tent, through which Major Westmorland and his betrothed were slowly entering. The grave eyes of the girl lit up as she saw that her brother and the Captain were the only two present.

Dick turned quickly towards his sister, forgetting the sheet of paper which his companion held in his hand. Disney, quietly folding it up, placed it carefully in his own pocket.

‘The world is in the marquee,’ announced Leo, ‘listening to an ambulance lecture. I would not go in, it is so hot, and they talk of things which take away my appetite. A man with a note-book and a pencil came up and asked me what my dress was made of; I think everybody is a little cracked this afternoon.’

The voice sounded mocking, and a little weary: unlike Leo. She sank down into a basket-chair, and smiled her thanks to Disney for the cup of creamy, fragrant coffee which he procured at once, before Evelyn had realised what she wanted.

‘Anything hot is nice, this treacherous day,’ said she, complainingly. ‘I do dis-

like this cold, bleak sunshine, trying to pretend it is really summer! All the women who have come in thin dresses have red noses! Ridiculous!'

'This thing is, nevertheless, suggestive of the dog-days,' said Disney, sitting down beside her and taking up a parasol of some diaphanous canary-coloured stuff.

'Just so! A fly-away parasol for effect, a warm dress for comfort!'

'Most sensible! And typical of the wearer, I humbly suggest. Plenty of sparkle outwardly, plenty of sense inwardly.'

'You have seen Mr. Westmorland, Leo, so Evelyn tells me,' interrupted Richard.

'Yes,' she replied, looking up at him, 'he is very ill.'

'He is much better,' hurriedly interposed the Major, 'and it was a great pleasure to him to see you.'

'He was very kind to me,' she said. 'I hope he will be better soon.'

A shadow seemed to fall alike on face and voice when she spoke of her future marriage, or anything concerning it.

'It must be a relief to you to see him mending so fast, it is a far more rapid convalescence than I had ventured to hope for,' said Dick to Evelyn. 'I hope that, now the anxiety is over, you will be more free; come and dine with us to-morrow.'

'Ay, do: we see nothing of you,' echoed Disney.

'You're very good, but I must take my father to Feverell Chase to-morrow; the Saxons go to Scotland, you know.'

'So they do, I had forgotten,' said Dick, with a slight shrug.

'My father is very anxious that Miss —ah!—that Leo should come and stay

with us,' went on the Major. 'He will write to-morrow, to Lady Royd, my mother's aunt, and ask her to bring some of her daughters to make the place more lively. He—wants to see you, if you could spare a moment; he is so anxious for the wedding to be as soon as possible.'

Dick looked anything but complaisant.

'I'll not have Leo hurried,—mark that!' he said. 'It shall take place when it pleases her, and not before—not a moment before. If she wants a year's grace, she shall have it.'

'A year!' echoed Evelyn, in a way that aroused all Forde's doubts into active antagonism.

'Yes, a year. There is plenty of time.'

'You know how anxious he is to see me married before he—goes,' slowly urged the Major, in a low voice.

These two were speaking apart. Disney was busily opening peach-stones for Leo, and extracting the kernels. Dick answered, steadily,

'She must take her own time. She is very young. I will not take upon myself the responsibility of urging her.'

Evelyn looked at Leo. At the moment, her soft, pretty laugh rang out as it had been wont to do before she was over-awed by her severe wooer. What a picture it was of healthful, gleeful girlhood, and handsome, conquering manhood! What a head Disney had! And how his fair locks showed up Leo's dark ones!

As he gazed, there swept over him anew a feeling of helplessness. What was he to do with this bright, freakish creature? Could he make her happy? He did not understand her as Disney appeared to do. Could he speak to her, or let Dick speak

to her, of immediate marriage and residence with him and his paralytic father at Feverell? As Muriel had said before, it seemed incongruous.

## CHAPTER V.

ON SUCH A NIGHT AS THIS— SO FULL OF STARS!

That was I you heard last night,  
When there rose no moon at all.

• • • • •  
Can't one even die in peace ?  
When one shuts one's eyes on youth,  
Is that face the last one sees ?

*Serenade at the Villa.*

THE second lecture was over, and swarms of people again poured into the refreshment-tent. Mrs. Shorthouse, finding herself near Leo, offered tepid congratulations. Several other ladies, so encouraged, followed suit ; but there seemed little heartiness in their expressions of goodwill. The fact

added to the girl's own secret, restless depression. She had been on the whole very popular in Norchester—the dull, heavy town had secretly felicitated itself on the possession of such a treasure. Her beauty and her spirits had been admired and wondered at, with a rather surprising tolerance; her position, as the young doctor's sister, had not been exalted enough to make people feel that they could not patronize her. They had made a point of encouraging 'that pretty little Miss Forde. Unsophisticated—very ! But then you see she is so young, and, with a few hints from *me*, she will soon be all that one could desire; and, besides, she must be very lonely, brought up as she was in a large family.'

Such had been the kindly feeling which had filled the breasts of the neighbouring matrons when Leo appeared on the scene. Even Mrs. Hancock, as has been hinted,

would not have objected to her as a daughter-in-law, to be paraded in public, crushed and dictated to in private. But now it seemed to these worthy people as though the young girl had stolen a march upon them all. She had used them and their kindness as stepping-stones to advance herself. Now she had wormed herself into the Hesselburgh *côterie*, she no longer needed the tennis at the Residence which had formerly been so acceptable.

She had soared too high. She had secured a position which would have been considered a marvellous piece of good fortune, even for one of the bishop's numerous daughters; in a few months she would be sweeping into all the best dining-rooms in the district, taking precedence of all her late patronesses, doubtless presented at court!

It was too much.

Leo partly understood, half regretted the

change. She wanted to be encouraged about her forthcoming marriage, to be reassured, as it were, by the envy and admiration of all around her. Everyone looked grave over it, as it seemed to her; even Mrs. Saxon, who had said, in her downright way,

‘I hope it may bring you happiness, my dear, but you are very young to be making a life-long choice.’

Nobody seemed pleased, except old Mr. Westmorland, and his joy terrified her.

No one could tell how she had been obliged to nerve herself for that first interview to-day. Dick had warned her to expect to find him much changed, but none the less had she recoiled, with inward repulsion, from the sight of the poor distorted mouth and drawn-down head and shoulder. To kiss him, as he ardently entreated, seemed the climax of all possible endur-

ance ; and, as she sat, trying to grasp the purport of the compliments he uttered in his now imperfect and impeded articulation, she said to herself that she could never make up her mind to live in the same house with one so distressingly afflicted. It seemed as if the Major's love-making were to be done by proxy. The old man had a ring for her—a magnificent Marquise ring—the family sapphire, circled in diamonds ; he held her slim hand, smiling to see the stones dart fire upon it, he stammered forth how much he envied Evelyn, how he wished he were young again, and wondered how his son had ever had the face to ask her to accord him so great, so unexpected a grace. She would come down to Feverell, would she not, to see her future home, and to gladden the hearts of the two lonely men, who would count the minutes until she came ? So he had drivelled on, in

husky, halting accents, until her appealing glances had brought Evelyn to the rescue, and he had led her away.

The old man readily let them go, nodding his head with a would-be smile on the poor down-drawn mouth, as he said he knew that, under certain circumstances, two was company and three none.

The two had walked in silence down the long, deserted corridor, through the open windows of which floated in dim echoes of applause from the marquee. Half-way along, Evelyn asked her, abruptly,

‘He is worse than you thought?’

‘Yes, he is,’ answered Leo, thoughtfully, adding, with a desire to soften this harsh statement, ‘I daresay he will be better soon.’

‘But, if you had seen him three days ago, you would think him greatly improved now,’ said Evelyn, with a sigh.

‘Was he so bad? You must have been very anxious.’

‘I was ; but as soon as his mind cleared I knew he would get well. It made him so unspeakably happy, that he was quite amiable.’

‘What made him happy ? What is “it” ?’

‘What ? why, you to be sure. You are curing him,’ he said, fervently.

‘I ?’

‘Yes ; he is delighted that you—that I—that you have promised——’

‘I see,’ was her hasty answer.

‘He is so fond of you, I am sure you will grow to love him,’ he went on, in his folly, never seeing how utterly meaningless all this talk was to the girl beside him.

She looked at him meditatively ; her glance was critical and cold, very unlike the passionate girlish worship of so few days back. She was being very rapidly disillusioned, and Edgar Disney was helping more in the process than he knew.

It had been pleasant to be out of doors again, and in his cheery society. He could always make her laugh. Now, when the people flocked out from the marquee and surrounded them, he came to the rescue at once.

‘Let us go and do the rounds in due form,’ he said, ‘there are some things displayed here in sober earnest which would make a cat laugh. Woollen towels, for one thing: everything must be natural wool now-a-days, you know, and of course woollen towels are of no earthly use to dry one’s skin withal, so the hygienic faction are fain to announce that it is healthier to remain wet. And this is in England, at the close of this century! What a nation of faddists we are becoming!’

‘Well,’ said Dick, good-humouredly, ‘one must, for the credit of one’s reputation, say that everybody always did everything wrong until we came to set it right. It

keeps people so happy and busy to turn the existing state of things upside down ; and then there is employment for the next generation, to put it all back again. I think old Herr Kinderspeisen is the worst of them all, though. He button-holed me just now with a paper of statistics. Not feed babies on milk ! Pretty good, isn't it ?'

'And so we go on,' moralized Edgar, 'and I suppose, after all, we are not much worse than we used to be ; whenever I am tempted to think that we are the climax of folly, I remember that my ancestors, after a dinner-party, used to have straw littered down around the dining-table and make a night of it.'

'And you think they would not have been worse employed even in trying to rub themselves dry on a health towel ?' laughed Tom Saxon, who had caught the remark in passing.

‘No, I really think not ; and it is saying a good deal,’ cried Disney, brightly.

‘Ah, you wait till you’ve tried, that’s all !’ was Tom’s oracular reply.

There were glances of disapproval from all who were within earshot ; the ladies, lately so hostile to science, had been profoundly impressed by the speakers of the day, and to treat so important a subject with levity was most unfitting, they thought. Disney, with characteristic, gay impertinence, attacked Mrs. Saxon herself, who was standing near, hearty and radiant.

‘Now, Mrs. Saxon, I appeal to you, as a lady of judgment, who is doubtless clothed from head to foot in natural wool, I appeal to you for a candid answer : would you, could you, bring yourself to use a natural wool towel ?’

‘Certainly not, odious things !’ was the prompt reply. ‘Has your experience not

yet taught you that a sensible idea is sure to be carried to extremes by foolish people? It is inevitable. Why distress yourself about the woollen towels? Nobody will use them, and they will die a natural death; they are not worth making a fuss about.'

'Natural wool should surely be undyed to die a natural death,' slyly whispered Disney to Leo, as the hostess hurried off; but, low as was the whisper, Tom caught it and groaned.

'Where are your usual powers, Captain Disney?'

'Natural wool-gathering,' laughed Edgar, as he left the tent with the Fordes and Major Westmorland.

The day was a huge success, altogether. The whole town laid down its arms, and surrendered unconditionally to the ambassadors of sanitation. When, at the close of the proceedings, the bishop an-

nounced the inauguration of the Nor-  
chester branch, and invited any intending  
members to come forward, the summons  
was responded to by the enrolment of  
a couple of hundred names.

The Fordes and Captain Disney remained  
to supper amongst the Saxons' own friends,  
and, as the evening went on, Leo began  
to feel her spirits rise. Evelyn thawed  
more than he had ever done before ; he sat  
next her, and talked a good deal, for him,  
his theme being malarial fever, of which  
he had seen a good deal in India, and  
concerning which he differed in opinion  
from the doctor who had lectured that  
afternoon. It was a subject which lent  
itself to anecdote, and he told her tales of  
his camp life which interested and thrilled  
her, and made her feel proud of him.

After supper, he took her into the li-  
brary, which was deserted, and told her how  
sorry he was to be leaving her to-morrow,

and how much he hoped she would ver  
soon come to Feverell.

‘I want to know you better,’ he said,  
humbly. ‘We seem such strangers, do  
we not?’

‘I am so shy of you,’ replied she, with  
beautiful blushes.

‘And I of you,’ he confessed, ‘strange  
as it may sound.’

The idea made them both smile; and  
she looked so pretty, and was so close to  
him, that he kissed her; and, as she did  
not resent this, possessed himself of her  
hand, and asked her if she liked her ring.

‘It was such a pleasure to him to give  
it you,’ he said; ‘but by rights it was my  
privilege, was it not?’

‘I saw Mrs. Shorthouse admiring it all  
supper-time,’ laughed Leo. ‘She will  
describe it to Mrs. Hancock! Did you  
know that you and I were the centre of  
attraction this evening?’

‘No!’ he returned, in some consternation, making her laugh again, quite merrily: but, at this moment, Richard’s voice was heard calling her.

‘I must go,’ she said, ‘but I will come up to the station, as you suggest, to-morrow, to say “Good-bye” to your father. I daresay Captain Disney will bring me, if Dick is away. He is so nice, isn’t he?’

‘Who? Disney?’

‘Yes. You and he are great friends, are you not?’

‘He has altered a great deal since I knew him,’ replied Evelyn, sternly; ‘or I have.’

Leo looked at him questioningly, but there was no time for more, as footsteps were drawing near; so, with a hurried farewell, she made her escape from the room, and he followed her into the hall.

Richard was buttoning his coat, and bidding Mrs. Saxon farewell.

‘ You may indeed congratulate yourself—it has been more than a success, it has been a New Departure,’ he said, cordially. ‘ I believe the whole tone of local thought will be changed from this day forward. You are a pioneer, Mrs. Saxon.’

The good lady was radiant.

‘ I don’t know what I should have done without you, doctor,’ said she, shaking hands heartily. ‘ You have been invaluable, pray accept my thanks. Dr. Compton mentioned you to me in the most complimentary terms. I heard him telling Mrs. Shorthouse that he thought the district most fortunate in the possession of such a thoroughly scientific young fellow!’

‘ I am several inches taller! But allow me to say that I value your commendations a great deal more than even Dr. Compton’s,’ replied Richard, with his eyes on Muriel’s golden hair.

‘ Good-night,’ he said to her, in a low

voice, a minute later. ‘ You look tired.’

‘ Yes, I am tired,’ replied she, a little weariness apparent in her calm tones. ‘ These things are rather exhausting; I wish Hope had been here, she would have been such a help.’

Tom, who was standing near, took up the word.

‘ Ah, true for you, old lady,’ he said, mournfully. ‘ We wanted Hope. If Hope had been here, the whole affair would have tasted different, somehow! Doesn’t a fellow miss her, just?’

Evelyn was advancing down the hall with Leo, and he heard these words. They tore open his wound so desperately, he felt as if he would bleed to death.

It was a fearfully sharp pang—a refinement of agony. How should he go on? How could he do without her?

Just for those few minutes in the library his fate had seemed almost bearable. What

a delusion did Tom's light words show such a thought to be !

He felt as if his misery must choke him. Dazed, he followed Leo's graceful figure down the hall ; mechanically he helped her up to her seat beside Disney in the cart.

Richard sprang up behind, beside Joe.

' Miss Forde tells me I shall see you again,' cried Edgar, gaily. ' My mission to-morrow, it seems, is to drive a disconsolate fair lady to the parting tryst with her true love. How many pocket-handkerchiefs ought I to take with me, to lend to my friends in case of an emergency ? Poor old chap ! ' to Evelyn. ' No wonder you look down in the mouth. What would you give me to drive the mare home—eh ? Jove ! what a night,' he added, more solemnly, gazing up into the pearl-strewn heavens. ' I hope you have wraps enough, Miss Leone, —those stars look like frost ! '

‘I am as warm as a toast, thank you ! Dick, it was clever of you to make me bring my furs ! How glorious the sky is ! I think I never saw the stars so bright ! Look, Evelyn, at the milky way. Is it not lovely ?’

Evelyn turned his tragic face up to those mute, spacious heavens, and in his sore heart was the longing, which Hope had felt so often, to be away beyond the stars, where the weary find rest.

‘You look like Hamlet, in the church-yard scene,’ laughed Edgar; ‘how becoming the starlight is, old man !’

And then the mare found she had had enough of it, and dashed off down the avenue.

‘Good-bye, Evelyn !’ rang out Leo’s clear voice. He wished, for her sake, that he might never hear it again.

To go indoors was impossible ; he wandered away, blind with pain, into the dark

garden, in and out, stumbling in the dim light now and then over a tent rope.

Still the vast glittering sky over-arched him. Wherever she was—his darling—at that moment, the same glory of stars bowed over her. If so she willed, she might lift hersweet eyes to the same point of brilliancy on which his were fixed : it seemed to create a point of meeting. Wherever she was, he prayed God that she was well and happy.

At that very moment Hope was coming out of the room in which Guy was convalescent ; he was asleep, after a day of fidgetting which had sorely tried her patience. Now that he was growing stronger, neither his tongue nor his limbs were ever still. Wilf was admitted into the same room with him, and the two together were, as Nurse White remarked, ‘ enough to bewilder a saint.’

Wilf was a credulous little boy, far less imaginative than Guy, but of tenacious

memory, and given to repeating everything he heard. For instance—

‘Do you know, Aunt Hope, one of the boys at our school saw a cat swallow a rat—whole! He *saw* the cat do it, and Guy says he doesn’t believe it’s true!’

‘Do you know, Aunt Hope,’ Guy would retort, mocking, ‘that a man papa knows once saw a ’bus horse swallow a conductor? He bolted him, you know. It was done in a minute.’

‘Oh, Guy!’ from Wilf, in horrified accents, ‘is that true?’

‘Yes, just about as true as your precious cat and rat story.’

‘Oh, Guy, you *are* unkind! Isn’t he awfully unkind, Aunt Hope?’

‘Don’t tease him, Guy dear. There! I have disentangled the knot from your wool: you can go on again.’

Guy’s stumpy fingers travelled obediently through his knitting for nearly two

minutes : when the result of Wilf's cogitations were suddenly hurled at his audience in the shape of this conundrum.

' But, Aunt Hope, just supposing a 'bus horse *did* eat up a conductor—just supposing, you know: would they try the horse for murder ? '

A whole day of this sort of thing had well-nigh wearied out Hope's patience. She had been feeling dull and heavy-headed all day, too, though, since Mabel Thorpe had been declared out of danger, she had felt as happy as it seemed probable she ever would feel.

Now Bowen came softly to relieve guard, and bade her young mistress go to bed at once.

Hope bent for a last look at Guy's beautiful, resolute face on the pillow : he was very like the young aunt who bent over him.

' Miss Merrion, it's courting infection to

hang over the child like that,' remonstrated Bowen.

'It will be ten days to-morrow since I came,' whispered Hope, smiling, 'so I ought to sicken now if I mean to, ought I not?'

'Don't talk so, miss: you terrify me.'

Hope went out on tiptoe, a smile on her white face. There was no blind to the landing window, and the stars showed through it. Raising the sash, she leaned out into the night. It was still, cold, and glittering. Far off, she could hear the murmur of the sea, in its restless monotony, rising and falling on its dark shore unceasingly.

A step on the gravel side-walk. She withdrew her eyes from the stars, and looked down; in the deep shadow she was hidden from view, but the dim radiance of the sky was on the face of the gentleman who passed, looking up at the house as he did so.

It was Gilbert Greville.

‘I told you so,’ murmured Hope to herself, with first a dash of amusement, and then a sigh of pain.

When he had gone by, she softly closed the window, and went to her room; and, as she drank the chocolate which Bowen had placed in readiness for her, she realized, with a sudden access of an emotion impossible to define, that it had become a matter of difficulty to swallow. Her throat was sore.

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE LAST DAY.

This is my holiday.

JULIAN STURGIS.

‘Let us be merry, and devise sports!’

‘With all my heart! What think you of falling in love?’

SHAKESPEARE.

CAPTAIN DISNEY seemed in no hurry to leave Norchester: he found the little house in Minster-gate exceeding comfortable. People perturbed themselves considerably about his continued presence there. In fact, Miss Press spoke to the doctor about it.

Miss Lucy Press might fairly be considered to rank as the first martyr to science

in Norchester. So impressed had the eldest sister been by the solemn warnings of the lecturer, that she immediately had the whole system of drainage in her quaint old house inspected; and thereby had proved the truth of the adage, 'Let sleeping dogs lie.' The awakened smells had given Miss Lucy, the youngest, a touch of gastric fever, and Richard was in attendance. He laughed very unconcernedly over the timid lady's hint that perhaps Miss Forde and Captain Disney were thrown too much in each other's society.

'You see, my sister is engaged to Major Westmorland,' he said. 'In two or three days she is going off to stay at Feverell Chase. I shall be very glad of the Captain's company when she is gone.'

'Humph!' was Mrs. Hancock's comment, when this was repeated to her. 'I don't fancy, somehow, that he'll stay very long after she's gone, do you?'

‘Do you fancy he admires her?’ fluttered Miss Press: ‘dear! how many lovers Leo Forde seems to have——’

‘I suppose Mrs. Saxon would be the last person to warn young Forde that he was outraging propriety,’ snapped Mrs. Hancock. ‘She is a woman who sets all custom at defiance, and no doubt, if she is satisfied, he does not care what other people think;’ which was truer than the speaker knew.

Leo’s going to Feverell had been postponed, owing to Lady Royd’s inability to be present: but now a day had really been fixed. She was to go on the 9th of October, and the 6th had already arrived.

Her departure being thus definitely arranged, the Captain began to realise that he should miss her greatly. He wished Westmorland would invite him, too, to Feverell; he was curious to see what became of the engagement.

Leone puzzled him a great deal. She was not at all like a girl whose heart was a hundred miles off. In fact, directly her *fiancé* left Hesselburgh, she seemed to shake off a certain constraint, and to grow more amiable and more charming daily.

He found himself remembering her words, trying to recall her tones—chuckling to himself over some of her nonsensical little speeches. He could not help suspecting that it was she, and she alone, who cast so enchanting a glamour over the young doctor's household.

The lazy amusement with which he had at first watched the engagement between her and Major Westmorland had changed, since he read the mystic prophecy, into a feeling of a most uncomfortable description. The uncouth lines had been studied by him so often since they came into his possession, that they seemed to repeat

themselves over and over again in his head :

‘Withouten Hope it shulde betye,  
The last sonne is an onely childe.  
Sonne ys hee of a yonger sonne,  
Ner wyfe ne childer hath hee non.’

The more he thought of them, the more he felt persuaded that Evelyn’s motive for marrying was not love. The suspicion made him more wretched than he could at all account for. When Leone came singing into the room with a handful of flowers from her old walled garden, and proceeded with lazy grace to dash them, apparently pell-mell, into various bowls and jars, where the effect was instant and telling, he would lay down his newspaper or his novel, and, with his cigar slowly expiring between his fingers, watch her earnestly with an aroused look in his beautiful eyes, and a mind full of dismal speculations. He would fancy the song quenched, the elasticity gone from the girlish move-

ments: he hated to fancy her as Evelyn's wife.

'Miss Leo,' he said, on the morning of the sixth, when he had so watched her silently some minutes. 'Let us finish gloriously. Shall we ?'

'What can you possibly mean?' said she, with the light awaking in eyes a moment before clouded with dark thoughts.

'My visit here has been—is so— Well, I hardly know what to say. Pleasant is too mild a word. It has been such a delightful experience: so unlike any sort of pleasure I ever knew before.'

He broke off, for Leo had made an involuntary movement as of escape. It was only momentary: soon she had commanded voice and complexion, and said, quietly,

'I am glad we have succeeded in preventing your feeling dull. I was afraid, after the Saxons went, you must find this place anything but enlivening.'

‘What a jaded wreck you must have thought me,’ he laughingly answered. ‘No, I am thankful to say my powers of enjoyment are not so entirely worn out. The suggestion I now have to make is that my visit should close suitably, with a grand finale of some kind. Did you not say you have never seen Marvaux Abbey?’

Her face kindled.

‘No, I never saw it.’

‘I propose that you, Dick, and I should make a day of it. It is too much for the mare in one day, so I suggest that Joe takes her over to Letley Bridge to-morrow, and that, on Wednesday, we take the train to Letley, and drive on from there—the whole expedition to be my affair entirely. You look pleased: it is my good fortune to suggest something that gives you pleasure?’

‘Indeed it does!’ she cried, gladly.  
‘What a capital idea. I shall enjoy it so

much ; the looking forward to it will quite prevent my dwelling on my visit to——'

She checked herself, covered with confusion ; and an awkward silence supervened. At last she spoke, slowly, and a little proudly.

' I should not have confessed,' she said, ' that I am shy of my visit to Feverell ; but I am. I have never met Lady Royd nor her daughters, and I wish that Richard were going with me. I am afraid of criticism.'

' It is most natural,' gravely replied Edgar, laying down his cigar ; ' and yet—forgive me if I say that, were I in Westmorland's place, I should be dissatisfied.' He rose determinedly, and came near where she stood. ' Were you engaged to me,' he said, in tense tones, ' I would demand that you should come gladly to the world's end if I were there.'

Leone had plenty of pluck. Beyond

the whiteness of her face, there was nothing to show that she was moved.

‘But I am not engaged to you,’ she replied, steadily, ‘and it seems futile to talk such nonsense.’

So saying, she took her empty water-can, and went out of the room to replenish it.

He flung himself down on the sofa, with an angry word, and perturbed countenance.

‘I do not believe she cares for him,’ he reflected, bitterly. ‘She is afraid of him, and that is the whole of the matter.’

When Dick was consulted, he agreed delightedly to the idea of the expedition; and next day, Joe and the mare were despatched, to put up at the inn at Letley Bridge, and be in readiness at the station the following morning.

The weather, now that October had begun, had improved again, as sometimes

happens. The sky was of faint tender blue, a warm haze covered the distances, and the woods were beginning to show their gorgeous panoply of scarlet, crimson, and gold, when Leo came downstairs on the eighth, ready for their early breakfast and start.

‘Oh, how delightful,’ she cried, ‘to think that we are not going to waste this perfect day, but to make the very most of it!’

‘Eat plenty of breakfast,’ Disney urged her, ‘you will be hungry before you get any dinner. Where’s that rascal Richard? He will not have time for a mouthful.’

‘I hope no patient has turned up to delay him,’ cried Leo. ‘I heard the surgery bell just now.’

Edgar cut a plateful of ham, and put it ready in Dick’s place. Leo buttered his toast, but when ten minutes had elapsed, and he came not, she went out to seek him.

He was not in the surgery at all, and, as she came through the hall, she noticed that his hat was gone.

‘I do really believe that he must have been called out,’ she announced, in dismay.

‘It is exceedingly awkward if he has,’ observed Edgar, ‘we ought to start the moment the fly comes ; if we miss this train, there is not another for two hours.’

After a short period of waiting, somebody knocked at the front door, and a note was brought to Leo.

It was from Richard ; a hurried pencil scrap.

‘The Deanery.

‘Very sorry ; no chance of my getting off ; the Dean—lungs, I am afraid, but as yet doubtful. Cannot say when I may be back, or if I could meet you anywhere. Am breakfasting here.

‘R. F.’

‘Well!’ cried Leo, trying to laugh off her vexation. ‘I seem doomed to disappointment!’

Edgar took the note and read it.

‘Well, I am sorry that he’s not available for the start,’ he said, composedly, ‘but you must put up with me until he comes.’

‘Oh, we cannot go without him,’ dejectedly answered the girl, sinking down into an arm-chair. ‘We must give it up.’

‘Give it up! No such thing! We can’t do that. There is no telegraph to Letley, and Joe won’t know what to do. You see, Dick suggests meeting us somewhere, he evidently does not contemplate our changing plans.’

‘Oh, but I don’t really think——’ began Leo, and stopped short reddening.

‘Ah, I see!’ cried Edgar, unscrupulously, ‘you do not trust me! That is it! I said something, the other day, which I

had no right to say, and you cannot be sure of my not repeating the offence.'

'Oh, you are very unkind!' said Leo, indignantly.

'It seems hard,' recklessly went on he, 'that I may not have this one day's happiness. Westmorland will have you all the rest of your life. You need scarcely grudge me my farewell pleasure, I think. It will soon be over, and you will be with your lover to-morrow. Could you not put up with me to-day?'

She was mute, not understanding the reason of this outburst. At last—

'You must see,' she slowly said, 'that I could hardly go—why will you ask it? You see quite well what I mean: you know I want to go.'

'Then, in the name of common-sense, why not go? I write a line to Richard, telling him where to meet us; I leave a fly at Letley to bring him on; he will be

able to get away, right enough ; he certainly, from this note, means us to go. Read it again.'

'I wish he would be more explicit,' said Leo, looking at her brother's scrawl.

'He knows I shall understand,' said Edgar, impetuously.

As usual, where his own desires were strong, every other consideration went to the wall ; he was determined to go, and Leone, all of whose wishes pointed in the same direction, was quite unable to hold out for long.

The fly, driving up to the door, clinched the matter, though why it should do so was scarcely obvious. Edgar scribbled directions on a card for Richard, which he stuck on the clock ; the same directions were also repeated verbally to the housemaid, who was left with injunctions to hurry the doctor off the moment he came in ; and, in an incredibly short space of time, Leo

found herself really off, driving with Edgar up the town, where it was fortunately, as yet, too early for the gossip-mongers to be about.

The full beauty of the day became first apparent when they were seated in the train. It was so sunny and warm and still and dreamlike that Leo wondered if it were all really true; that she was awake and in her senses—engaged to Evelyn Westmorland, and sitting opposite Edgar Disney in the railway-carriage, as they rushed through the autumn land.

The country was uneventful until they reached Letley Bridge, where Joe and the cart were duly in waiting. The groom was left at the station to procure a carriage, and to bring Richard on when he arrived, and the young couple started off together on their twelve miles' drive.

When they started, Disney was somewhat silent; but, as they advanced into

the beautiful scenery which surrounds Marvaulx, he turned to his companion with a smile.

‘Are you enjoying it?’

‘It is simply beautiful. I am drinking it in.’

‘Better than stopping at home—eh?’

‘Oh!’ she cried, impulsively, ‘I am glad I came!’

‘So am I,’ he said, in a low tone, ‘glad you came. I want to enjoy this one day, without thinking of to-morrow.’

He saw her gay face cloud instantly, and his heart began to beat excitedly. The girl’s beauty had made a profound impression upon him: he could not bear to see that look. Something was wrong,—something must be desperately wrong between her and Westmorland. If he could but find out what it was! He wondered at himself, as he drove on, to think how entirely Leone had chased Hope Mer-

rion's image from his mind. In his heart of hearts, he felt nearer to Leo than he had ever done to Hope. His engagement had been, after all, an effort.

When Hope first appeared in Colombo, her triumph had been universal. She was raved over: every man that Disney knew was in love with her: he himself had been completely overmastered by her wonderful charm. When she accepted him, his elation and triumph had raised him to the seventh heaven; and yet, as he grew to be with her, and talk to her on terms of greater intimacy, he had felt uncomfortably that it was a strain: that he was not exactly acting a part, but acting so much above his usual level that the continuance of it would be a labour. With Leone he never felt thus.

The motives which guide human conduct are very strange: sometimes very

small. If Leo had not been engaged when he first met her, she might never have made so deep an impression. The Captain would have been more wary, and kept himself upon a different footing; for Leo was not by any means a brilliant match.

Knowing her appropriated, he had associated with her fearlessly: and he began to fear that he had gone too far for his own peace of mind.

The shadow still rested on Leo's face as he looked by stealth at her. How beautiful was the line of her profile; the impetuous mouth, the rounded chin, the line of throat, and the graceful sweep of her young form, in its neatly-fitting garment.

‘Leo,’ he said, very low, ‘I beseech you, smile upon me. If you look sad, you make a strange swelling come in my throat, and these yellow stubble fields seem so forlorn, and even the blue sky is grieving.’

She shivered, and for a little made no reply, but soon seemed to nerve herself to answer.

‘Is it fair—is it right—to talk to me like this?’ she faltered.

‘No,’ he said, energetically, ‘it is not! I am a poor, cowardly wretch, unable to keep my own feelings in the background; you must help me to be strong, help me by being gay and like yourself.’

‘Gay and like myself,’ she repeated, with a wistful smile. ‘That is not easy, to-day.’

## CHAPTER VII.

## LEO'S TREASON.

Love hangs like light about your name  
As music round the shell :  
No heart can take of you a tame  
Farewell.

SWINBURNE.

‘WHY is it not easy to-day?’ he asked, gently.

She did not answer: and, after a little silence, he spoke again of something different.

‘There is Marvaulx,’ he said, pointing with his whip to where the white walls of the abbey gleamed in the distance.

‘This is a long hill: will you care to walk a little way?’

‘Yes.’

She assented. He lifted her down, and they walked side by side up the steep slope.

He was really sorry for his own unguardedness, and anxious to reassure her. Presently he intended to have her entire confidence, and he knew that this could never be accomplished if he scared her now, or was in any way too sudden or abrupt.

All the way up the hill he chatted to her of the old abbey and its history. It had been a convent of nuns, not a monastery, and a fearful interest had been imparted to it of late years by the discovery of a skeleton of a woman, bricked up in a wall. She was crouched together in such an attitude of mute despair as to leave no

doubt of her having been buried alive. Leo had never heard the tale before, and it thrilled her to such an extent as to divert her thoughts from herself, as he had hoped it would.

By the time they had arrived at the quaint and primitive hostelry which stood just outside the abbey grounds, she had quite recovered her spirits.

Edgar ordered dinner, and secured some fruit for their present refreshment, as they decided not to dine until Richard came. Then, leaving the horse and trap, they wandered away together into the wood which skirted the ruins.

Of all exquisite spots for love-making, Marvaulx is surely first and foremost. The curve of the pure stream circles it like a silver bow; the rich woods hang over the pellucid water. The white tower is reflected in the river, and the ruin itself,

in wonderful preservation, is as fine an example as we have of Early English in its oldest and severest form.

To the two who wandered, on that still sunny day, among the glades, its influence was almost overwhelming.

Dappled deer started shyly from the bracken as they advanced ; the broad sunlight lay warm upon the moss, and streamed through the dark foliage. The delicate hare-bells nodded in the dew, and the good scent of the hot earth steamed up into the fragrant air.

They were apparently the only human creatures in this lonely paradise ; and the silence seemed to draw them nearer, ever nearer to each other.

They rested at last, in a warm nook outside a bend in the abbey wall. The sight of the niche, whence the bones of the unhappy nun had been taken, had sobered Leone, and again on her face was

the shadow which Disney could not bear to see there.

'To be buried alive has always seemed to me the most dreadful death that I could picture,' she said.

'I fancy it would be difficult to over-estimate the horror of it,' he answered.

'To have your life all strong in you,' went on the girl, 'and your heart beating, and the world—this beautiful world!' she glanced around—'spread out in your very sight, and for cruel hands to take you and fasten you up in the dark to die—ah! It is too shocking to think of; it makes one hate one's fellow-men, to think that anybody could ever have stood by and seen it done.'

'Some women,' slowly said Edgar, who was lying face downwards upon the moss, his head resting on his arm, 'some women deliberately choose such a fate.'

'What can you possibly mean?'

‘I ought to have said that very few deliberately choose it: their parents and guardians choose it for them. They take them, and, as you say, shut them up in the dark to die; but now-a-days the dying is not so quickly accomplished, sometimes it takes a life-time of captivity and suffering quite to kill a woman.’

She looked at him with dilated eyes, but did not speak.

‘They brick up their souls, not their bodies, now-a-days,’ he explained. ‘I fancy the suffering may be keener, because it lasts longer; I mean, of course,—I am speaking figuratively. It seems to me that a woman married to a man she does not love is walled up. The bright outer world is no more for her; she is alone, in cold and darkness; and no human power can release her, all her life.’

Leo was as white as a sheet.

She put up her hand to shade her eyes.

At last, agitated words burst from her.

'But how is one to know? How can one be sure? How can one tell?'

'How can you be sure of what?' asked the Captain.

'That you really love;' her voice shook piteously. 'How is a girl to feel sure of her own feelings when they change so fast —when every day brings fresh thoughts and new ideas? If you could know how I have changed . . . how every feeling I had seems to have been transformed in the last few months! . . . But I could not explain; I don't understand myself: all my mind is in such confusion that there seems no firm ground anywhere!'

She hid her face, while the warm wind whispered by, bringing puffs of seductive

sweetness from the wallflowers which grew in the clefts of the ruined walls.

Edgar moved a little nearer to her, and took her hand. She drew it away with a start.

‘ Forgive me,’ said his gentle voice, ‘ please forgive me, Leo. I would not hurt or wound you for the world. But I want to feel sure that you are happy. I am an old friend of Dick’s, you know, and I like him extremely ; I can see how his happiness is bound up in yours. Now, can you pardon it if I speak frankly to you ? This may be the last time I shall ever dare so to address you, and in the past fortnight we have seemed to grow such friends : will you grant me the friend’s privilege of plain speech ?’

Her hands fell into her lap, and he saw her white face ; her great eyes, melting in tears, fixed far away on the autumn woods. She did not look at him.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘you may speak. I feel—sometimes—as if you could help me—as if you could understand in a way that Dick cannot.’

His beautiful eyes kindled.

‘I believe that is so,’ he said, ‘and you make me very proud. Now, will you try to tell me what you meant, just now, when you said you were not sure of your own feelings. Did you mean—forgive my unspeakable boldness—did you mean your feelings towards—Westmorland?’

It was fine to see the rich blood spring to her face.

‘Yes,’ she answered, steadily, still not looking at him.

‘Leo, you must let me tell you straight out. If your feeling towards him admits of a doubt, you cannot truly love him.’ She started violently. ‘But, hear me,’ he cried, earnestly, ‘I feel it so probable that you don’t understand yourself. Look into

your heart—test it. Suppose I told you Westmorland was dead, that you would never see him again,'—she exclaimed faintly—‘should you feel that it was the end of everything for you? How should you feel? Think what a noble fellow he is, and how handsome! Would his death mean a broken heart to you—at all events, for the present; would it turn your world to dust and ashes?’

She made no answer.

‘Which would you feel more—his death or Dick’s?’ softly pursued Edgar.

She gave a cry.

‘Oh, Dick’s—Dick’s, of course!’ she gasped out, tearfully. ‘Please don’t talk so horribly—I cannot even bear to think of such a thing as losing Dick!’

There was a long, long silence. Edgar never once took his eyes off her, watching the various feelings pass over her face in

rapid change, like clouds casting shadows over the uplands.

At last she stretched both her hands out to her knees and wrung them together.

‘What am I to do?’ she said; and, after a pause: ‘I do not think I ought to marry him . . . But, when he asked me, I felt so sure I loved him: he is so good and noble. “We needs must love the highest when we see it,” but I think he is too high up for me. I am a lower thing than I believed myself to be . . . But what am I to do? What can I do?’

‘*Fays ce que dois, advienne que pourra,*’ said Disney, softly.

‘Oh,’ she cried, ‘but how could I go back from my word, so lately given? What would Richard think of me? what would anybody think of such inconceivable fickleness? why, it is not a month ago! . . . I sit here, as if I were staring my own

self in the face,' she said, excitedly, ' and I despise myself! I say to myself, what a wretch must you be, Leone Forde, to do such a fearful thing! to give such a binding solemn promise, and not to be able to keep it for a month! For a month? . . . In my secret heart I believe I did not keep it for a week!' again she buried her face.

His heart was beating excitedly; had her treason begun even sooner than she knew—when she met him on the station platform?

'Leo,' he said, solemnly, 'which would be the worse thing: to own your mistake while there is yet time, or to stand in church and utter vows which, even now, before you make them, are broken, as you yourself confess?'

'Oh, I don't know! I don't know!' she cried. 'I cannot understand it. Has it been all my fault? Sometimes I think I should like to feel that he has been to

blame too! . . . He is so cold . . . so distant, and stiff! It is simple truth to say that I know less of him now than when I engaged myself to him. He scarcely seems glad to see me ; I know he finds it difficult to talk to me ! I thought,' said she, with quivering lip, ' that I was superior to the desire for ordinary, vulgar love-making ; but a little more tenderness would perhaps—perhaps have made it easier to love him.'

Disney, brought by this speech face to face with his difficulty, dropped his forehead between his hands and deliberated a long time.

He had received from Leone a plain declaration that she did not love Westmorland ; this she had given almost spontaneously, the pent-up distress of her mind finding vent at the first touch of sympathy. Her chief cause for unhappiness, naturally, was the fear that her fickleness would cause

Westmorland to suffer. As if in opposition to this feeling, she had gone further, and said what certainly implied a doubt of his affection for her.

In these circumstances, should he be justified in telling her of this prophecy which lay in his pocket-book, suggesting so strongly another reason than love for the Major's wish to marry? To put the question in another form: should he be justified in keeping such knowledge from her?

When the girl's whole future hung in the balance, was it not his duty to put her in possession of all the facts?

It seemed to him as if the problem turned chiefly on the question of what were Evelyn's feelings. Did he love Leo? If so, what a treacherous hound was he, Disney.

But then he was secretly so certain that Evelyn was not in love with her. In fact,

no other hypothesis seemed to account at all satisfactorily for his extraordinary behaviour. The situation was more deeply complicated by the fact, borne in upon the reasoner most vividly during the past few hours, that he himself did love Leone, deeply and strongly, far too much to be able to let her go calmly, even to a man she cared for. To see her sacrificed to some one whom confessedly she did not love, was a great deal more than he felt able to support with fortitude.

Here they sat, side by side ; the hour was his. Her confidence in him showed pretty plainly that her heart went out to him : he could make her love him. Surely, surely, it was fair, taking all things into consideration, to steal a march on Westmorland, to rescue certainly one person, perhaps two, from life-long misery.

It was a point of honour too delicate and

too intricate for him to be able to see all its bearings. An inner voice seemed to say, beneath the strong current of his inclinations,

‘ Let this matter alone. Westmorland is your friend, and this girl plighted her troth to him. She did it of her own free will, and you know pretty accurately that, had you not appeared on the scene, she would in all probability have had no doubts of her feelings. You are deliberately stealing her away from him, who was so loyal to you that he even declined to be friends with a girl who had, as he thought, treated you badly. Even now, if you had the fortitude to leave her, she would most likely, in her visit to Feverell, become more at ease with her grave suitor, and grow gradually happy with him. How do you know he does not care for her? Is he a man to wear his heart upon his sleeve? Think how her presence

would brighten his life, her face illumine his lonely home. Dare you deliberately take her away from him ?'

' Yes, I dare,' he mentally replied. ' My love for her is my justification. It is false to say that she could ever be happy with him. Had she never seen me, it might have been ; but now it is too late. Am I to blame? Did I know how matters stood when I came to Norchester? Did Perseus, when he saw Andromeda, argue that, as all her relations had handed her calmly over, it was none of his business to try to save her? Pshaw! Away with such sentiment! I have seen the girl whom I love, and am I to sit down with folded hands and see her sacrificed ?'

' Oh, yes, you love her now,' argued the voice, ' but how about next year, and all the years to come? How about Nellie Wetherell, Hope Merrion, and others who went before them? You are so easily

satisfied, is it worth while to make all this disturbance about Leone Forde?’

‘I never loved Nellie Wetherell,’ was his answer. ‘I behaved like a villain to her, for I made her believe that I did. I did not love even Hope as I love Leone. She suits me. I feel calmly certain of always liking to have her with me through all the years to come. I love her more self-denyingly than ever before; she is poor, and the fact makes me love her better. It is a love worth risks, and I swear I will win her if I can.’

At this determination had his disturbed thoughts arrived, when Leo broke the long silence.

She spoke straight on from the point of her own meditations.

‘I have even thought,’ she said, more as if thinking aloud than as if addressing him, ‘once or twice it has occurred to me to wonder if he loves me at all; or if he

is not marrying me to please his father.'

'What should make you think that?' he asked, quickly.

She looked intently at him—for the first time since they began to talk.

'I think so,' she said, 'only because Mr. Westmorland seems so overjoyed about it, and because I feel sure that Evelyn would do anything to please his father.'

'I suppose,' said the Captain, staring at the ground, 'that you know all about the prophecy?'

By the glance shot at him, he saw instantly that she knew nothing about it.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

For good or evil, the die was cast now.

'It is strange, I think, you have not been told; Richard knows all about it,' he said.

'I hope you will explain,' she answered.

He did explain. He drew out the

rhyme and laid it before her, in Evelyn's hand-writing. He unfolded to her its supposed meaning. She read it carefully, listened to what he said: and then leaned forward, her chin on one hand, while the paper drooped idly from the other.

Edgar, as he looked attentively at her, knew that Evelyn's doom was sealed.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## EDGAR AS CONFIDANTE.

The books say well, my brothers—each man's life  
The outcome of his former living is :  
The bygone wrongs bring forth sorrow and woes,  
The bygone right breeds bliss.

EDWIN ARNOLD.

‘WHAT am I to do?’ she sighed at last.

Disney was silent: a vague apprehension was taking hold of him. His conscience, the minute the thing was done, seemed to accuse him, whereas before, he had felt so certain of being in the right. He began to wonder whether the true, the knightly thing to do, would not have been to go

quietly away, the moment he felt himself beginning to care for Leone, and await the issue, trusting to her own conscientiousness to break the engagement, if she really cared nothing for Westmorland ; but he had an answer ready for this too. She would never have gathered courage to take such a decisive step unsupported ; she was so young, so distrustful of herself.

‘Right and wrong be hanged,’ he reflected fiercely, ‘all’s fair in love and war. She is full of character, though still young ; in a year’s time both she and Westmorland would be miserable, if I had allowed it to go on. I never showed her the thing till she had first owned to having made a mess of it ; then it was right to give her the strongest incentive to take decisive measures——’

‘You don’t speak,’ said Leo, heavily.

‘ I asked you a question that nobody but myself could answer. I feel that.’

So saying, she rose to her feet, and went and stood against a crumbling piece of masonry, leaning her arms upon it, and gazing sadly at the sun-speckled bracken glades under the trees.

Edgar thought he had never seen a more exquisite picture. He too rose, and followed her.

‘ I would do anything to help you,’ he said ; adding, in lower tones, ‘ you know that.’

‘ A girl who breaks her engagement is called a jilt,’ she said, absently. ‘ My uncle used to say that a betrothal was almost as solemn a thing as marriage, and never to be lightly entered into. I wish Hope were here, to console me. She is so brave, and sees so clearly ; she broke her engagement, because the man disappointed her, but she

told me it was a terrible thing to do, and cost her great suffering.'

The speaker could not see the cruel confusion which this speech caused her companion.

'Oh, Leo,' he said, tremulously, 'judge men gently; they have so many chances to be base which you sweet women, sheltered and protected, know nothing of. Such a man as Miss Merrion sent away might be saved by the love of a good woman.'

'Yes?' she said, apathetically. 'I don't know. I know nothing of men, or women, or of life at all; only that things go wrong so easily, all of a sudden, and—and—I want to do right, if only I know what right is.'

She was trembling with the effort to keep back tears.

'Leo,' said Edgar, softly, 'you and I are both at the most difficult part of our lives

—the time when we have to make a choice. Do you suppose any man or woman gets through it without suffering? If we did, the chances are that we never should be worth anything afterwards.'

'Have you suffered?' she asked.

'Yes. I did wrong, and I had to take my punishment. I think I am the better for it, but it was pretty bad at the time.'

'When we were staying at Leaming, with Mr. Lyster,' said Leo, thoughtfully, 'we used to go up to the vicarage to see Mr. and Mrs. Wetherell.'

Edgar winced, as at a painful touch.

'They are both very unhappy,' she went on, 'because last year they lost their only niece—Nellie; they were devoted to her, and she died of a decline. One day we had been to see her grave, and afterwards poor Mrs. Wetherell said, "My dears, the doctors may call it what they like, but I

know better: our Nellie died of a broken-heart, and there's a man now alive that killed her.”

‘Good God!’ exclaimed Edgar; and then, as she turned her startled eyes to his—‘What right has anybody,’ he cried, ‘to say such a thing—to make such an accusation?’

‘Hope told her she had no right to say so,’ replied his unconscious torturer. ‘She said no man had power to break a woman’s heart, if only she were strong. Hope used to put flowers on her grave. What made me think of it was what you said just now—that nobody gets through this part of their life without suffering. You see, Hope, Nellie, you and I have all suffered. I hope dear Dick will not.’

The wave of self-scorn which swept over Edgar at that moment was perhaps the healthiest emotion it had as yet been his

to feel. It was a terrible revelation to hear of Nellie's death. Not for a moment had he imagined any permanent consequences to his flirtation with the pretty governess. For a few moments he loathed himself. At the same time, Hope's nature seemed to rise before him in a most lovely contrast to his own. Not a word had she spoken. He guessed quite well that she had purposely refrained from owning to the Wetherells that she had known Nellie in Colombo, lest she should be questioned concerning the man who had trifled with Nellie's feelings. He felt himself unfit to mate with any woman so good and beautiful as Leone. His penitence was as severe as it was novel.

‘Leo,’ he said, huskily, ‘the terrible part of wrong-doing is that you can never get rid of it. You do one wrong, and it rears itself always ahead of you when you least

expect it. Remember that!—If in this matter of your engagement you act against your own conscience, you will go on repenting all your days.'

'Oh,' she answered, firmly, 'I have made up my mind. I must tell Major Westmorland. I cannot let it rest as it is.' Then she laughed, a little hardly, crushing the prophecy in her hand. 'It was extremely simple of me,' she said, 'I must have been infatuated with vanity to think that a man like Major Westmorland could love a girl like me! Why, he did not even know me!'

'You must, of course, allow me to contradict that,' he said. 'You are so intensely lovable that the difficulty is to conceive of anyone having any other motive in the case. Perhaps—perhaps, after all, he does love you, Leone. If you thought so, would it change your feelings?'

‘In one way: it would make me far more reluctant to give him pain. But I have been thinking it over, and I am more and more sure that it is not so. I have been thinking over all his words to me, as far as I can remember them,—for I was in such a whirl I can hardly recall what passed; but, as far as I am able to recollect, he never has said to me plainly, “I love you!”—never once!—here, without warning, her voice failed utterly, and she burst into tears.

‘Go away,’ she managed to gasp to him.  
‘Go away, please—don’t look at me!’

He went, instantly: he had no right to kiss away her tears: in his present humiliation he felt as if he should never dare to ask for the right. Only upon one thing he was quite determined: that, before asking her anything, she should hear from his lips the whole story of his love-affairs, unvarnished and complete.

‘I owe her that,’ he thought.

For a time he walked up and down, out of sight of her, but in sight of the angle of wall which contained her.

When he came back, she was quite quiet and composed, and greeted him with a little smile.

‘If you feel well enough,’ he said, ‘I think we ought to go in quest of Dick and our dinner.’

‘Yes, I will come,’ she answered: and in silence they walked back through the woods which they had before traversed so joyously.

In the midst of the fern he stopped for a moment, and took her hands.

‘I want to tell you,’ he said, ‘how unspeakably you honour me by your confidence: you will know, without my telling you, how sacred it will be.’

‘Yes, thank you; you are very kind,’

she replied, so spiritlessly that he walked on in silence, feeling vaguely rebuked.

When they reached the inn, Richard had not come.

This seemed to make Leo uneasy and apprehensive. Not all the charm and coolness of the quaint oak parlour, nor the temptingness of the repast which Disney had ordered, could give her an appetite ; and, as soon as he had finished eating, she said, diffidently,

‘ It is too late to expect Dick now, is it not ? ’

‘ I am afraid so ; there was only one train he could come by, and that should have brought him here a good deal more than an hour ago.’

‘ Then I think, please, if you will not be offended, I should like to go home.’

He explained with regret that this was impossible for nearly three hours to come.

If they started at once, they would reach the station about twenty minutes late for the only early train.

He was so distressed about it that she tried to reassure him, and soon, seeing there was no help for it, consented to go back with him and thoroughly explore the ruins. Gradually, as they walked back, he succeeded in comforting her, though by slow degrees. He knew that, when once their former footing of intimacy was rebuilt, they would be closer friends by far than before. At present it was but natural that the girl should be half-afraid of the unreserve into which she had been betrayed. He chose a beguiling subject for conversation—first his own childish reminiscences, then her own. She forgot her present troubles, by little and little, and told him of life at Sandwater Vicarage, and of her own delight at coming to live with Dick.

‘I wish I had a sister or a mother,’ she said, sadly. ‘Hope is the sister I would have chosen.’

They clambered up and down turret stairs, walked along the thick walls, and penetrated into the crypt. As they emerged from this last, the sound of a loud laugh, and the popping of a cork, warned them of the presence of the tourist, feeding, as is the manner of his kind, as close to consecrated walls as he possibly could.

They came out at the end of the north transept, and were full in view, suddenly, of the pic-nic party seated round a white table-cloth on the grass, with abundance of pigeon-pies, salad, and bottled stout spread out around them.

As they advanced, Leo stopped abruptly short, and some sudden uncomfortable feeling made her crimson to the roots of her hair. It was the Misses Openshaw who were giving the pic-nic in honour of

their brother, home from America; Leo knew everyone of their guests, and Mrs. Hancock was among them. There seemed to flash instantly across her mind the conviction of what these people must think of her appearance, at such a remote spot, with Captain Disney. Right through her the bolt seemed to quiver; she felt quite sick with the awkwardness of the moment.

‘Oh,’ murmured she to Edgar, ‘what shall we do? I can’t, I won’t speak to them!’

‘No need at all,’ he replied, hurriedly, smiling at the same moment, and doffing his hat to Mrs. Hancock, the only lady he knew. ‘How do you do, Mrs. Hancock?’ he cried, raising his voice to show he did not mean to come any nearer. ‘Seen the doctor anywhere about?’

The lady so appealed to, vehemently shook her head, outraged propriety blazing in every lineament.

‘If you see him, tell him we are going back to the inn,’ he replied, unblushingly. ‘Splendid day, isn’t it? Quite like summer again! *Au revoir!*’ with which he turned back within the abbey walls, Leo following him.

He saw that she was quite white, and trembled in every limb, but he hurried her on until they were far removed from the inopportune invaders of their solitude, till they had plunged deep into the tangles of the wood, and were once more entirely alone.

‘That was unlucky!’ he said, thoughtlessly, and then stopped short, awed, horrified by the unspeakable expression in his companion’s eyes.

All idea of joking left him instantly.

He was quick enough, and a great part of what lay behind her look was perfectly intelligible to him.

The eyes of these people had brought

her suddenly back into the world of every-day life, out of the sweet enchantment in which Disney had enfolded her. The vague uneasiness with which she had consented to go off with him that morning, leaped suddenly into a full-grown consciousness of having done what was wrong. She had followed him as blindly as if he had mesmerised her, had confided in him utterly, had spoken to him with more unreserve than ever to any creature in her life before.

Why had she done it? She knew now. She loved this man, and she did not, and never could love Evelyn Westmorland.

The feeling uppermost in her was the consciousness of being utterly at his mercy.

Heedless and easy as Edgar was, he yet saw how cruelly selfish his conduct had been. For the pleasure of having her to

himself for that day, and of securing her confidence, he had placed her in a position whose awkwardness can probably be gauged only by those who have lived in country towns.

That she had been seen alone with him at Marvaulx would be all over the town to-morrow; then would follow the news of her broken engagement. In the present state of local feeling with regard to Leo, it could safely be predicted that judgment against her would be unhesitatingly unkind. No one would believe that the cancelling of the engagement came from her; that such a girl should voluntarily resign such a chance would be considered too far beyond the pale of probabilities.

Disapproval of the Fordes might even extend further, and injure Richard's growing practice. In a flash, Disney seemed to

see all this, and that the place would be almost too hot to hold poor Leo for the next few months. And how could he help her? It was surely not possible to speak to her of his love while still she was engaged to his friend. Supposing that her being 'on with the new love' followed hard upon her being 'off with the old,' he could not see that this would raise her much in the eyes of the world. He had brought her to this, and now he was powerless to help her. A passion of love, sympathy, and regret shook him. If only she would come to him, what years of devoted love should atone for what she suffered now.

She did suffer. He could only guess at the shame and bitterness that almost burst her young heart. The expression of her mouth, as she walked beside him, forced tears to his eyes: and, at last, he could no longer contain his feelings.

‘Oh, Leo,’ he said, ‘what have I done? I have hurt you, whom I would die for; I have distressed you, when I would give all I have to comfort you! Speak to me, please! Your white face cuts right into my heart!’

It might have been another woman who answered him.

‘Please take no blame to yourself, Captain Disney; that is all mine. I do not feel fit to enter into any explanation now: the kindest thing that you can do will be to take me straight home.’

‘I will do it, and not say a word,’ he replied, shamefacedly. ‘I would do anything for you—though perhaps I should not expect you to believe that, now. If I live, I will find some way to prove it to you.’

Not another word passed between them until they reached the inn. And there,

leaning over the gate, looking impatiently down the road by which they came, was Richard: and, at the expression of his face, Leone, who had never before seen him really angry, quailed.

## CHAPTER IX.

## B R O K E N D O W N.

Let me and my passionate love go by,  
 But speak to her all things holy and high,  
 Whatever happen to me !

Me and my harmful love go by :  
 But come to her waking, find her asleep,  
 Powers of the height, powers of the deep,  
 And comfort her, though I die !

TENNYSON.

A REASON for the strange reticence of the Merrions about their addresses on their travels was partly given by Mrs. Merrion, when she arrived in England without her husband. The large firm in which he was a partner was in difficulties, chiefly through his own imprudence.

Bertha came to Dalby Sands in a state of mind anything but conducive to enabling her to bear the pressure of anxiety. There was nobody at leisure to pay her any attention. Mabel Thorpe was fast mending, but still very weak; Guy and Wilf not yet allowed out of doors; and Hope was dying.

It was pathetic to see the devotion with which Dr. Humbey laboured to save her life. Hardly anyone durst approach him; his state of mind was so agitated, so highly strung.

She seemed so passive—that was his chief distress: she made no fight against the disease.

Bertha was terribly afraid of the infection, and there was no room for her in the house, so she went to the hotel: and for nearly three days awaited the summons to come and bid Hope good-bye. The only person she had to speak to was Gil-

bert Greville, who spent half his time on the doorstep at Marine Parade, making enquiries and delivering consignments of fruit and flowers.

The fact that, had she done her duty, Hope would never have been exposed to infection at all, did not seem to trouble Mrs. Frederic Merrion in the least. She was quite ready to believe that Guy's illness had never been so serious as people wanted to make out, and that it was nothing but Miss Thorpe's imprudence in allowing him to take cold that had caused him to develop a severe form of the complaint.

'Scarlatina is nothing, as children usually have it,' she said, calmly. 'Look at Wilf, he was scarcely ill at all. I don't think I shall keep Miss Thorpe. I give her forty pounds a year, and now that both the boys go to school, a nursery governess at twenty pounds a year would do just as well, and

not be so opinionated. Think of the expense, too, of having her mother stopping in the house for a week! One might be made of money.'

Poor Bertha! She felt that she was being ill-used all round. It was particularly unfortunate that Hope should be too ill to be spoken to on business, just at the time when Frederic wanted her to advance the greater part of her fortune to him, to help him tide over his difficulties. She really felt as if life were not worth living, during the days she unwillingly spent at the 'nasty, inferior hotel.'

But of all the persons then suffering, in mind or body, Major Westmorland's portion was perhaps least to be envied. He had never feared man, woman, or child before, but he did fear to show his father poor Leo's contrite, pleading, self-reproachful letter.

Yet, through all the taunts, the sneers, the grief he had to bear, he never lost sight of one strange fact,—a fact, he pondered over, and considered, and could not understand: namely, that when first he gathered the sense of that letter, when first he seized upon the truth, that he was dismissed—released—his heart gave a great bound, as though a weight were lifted from it, and he said aloud,

‘Thank God !’

None the less, however, did he find his days in the dreary house almost intolerable.

Mr. Westmorland had raved much less than might have been expected; perhaps his great weakness warned him to avoid unnecessary exertion. He had merely remarked with a sneer, as he laid down the letter, that what had surprised him had been Miss Forde’s entering upon the engagement at all, not her wishing to be

quit of it ; but as days wore on he seemed to sink into an absolute gloom of despondency, from which nothing roused him.

Lady Royd, his aunt, and her two daughters, were put off, at his request. The exertion of seeing company was too much for him, he said.

‘ The Westmorlands are quite crazy,’ was Lady Royd’s remark, on receipt of Evelyn’s somewhat incoherent letter. ‘ His engagement is at an end, it seems. Just as well, I should say, she seems to have been nobody, and really I don’t think it at all advisable for Evelyn to marry, for I seriously believe he is out of his mind over the prophecy. And you may depend that, if it is decreed that the family is to become extinct, something will always happen to prevent his marriage,’ added her ladyship, who was a fatalist, and, as a member of the family, firmly believed in the Curse.

It was three days after the termination of his brief engagement, that Evelyn, on going into his father's room, saw him reading a letter from Mrs. Saxon.

'You can read that, if you like,' he said, tossing it towards his son.

Evelyn took it up and glanced down the first page.

'I am not at all inclined to be sympathetic over the Major's jilting,' wrote Mrs. Saxon. 'I never, as you know, considered the match suitable. It was too hurried, and the girl too young. If Norchester gossip is to be trusted, Captain Disney seems to be at the bottom of it, and I think her better suited to him than to a man of deep character, like Evelyn. Her brother has sent her to Sandwater Vicarage, I hear, for a long visit, for the whole town is talking of nothing else. He, poor fellow, is terribly cut up about it, and greatly blames himself for not having

taken better care of her. He is coming up to us for a week's shooting. I am afraid it is hardly wise of me, but Muriel seems to find it difficult to take any notice of anybody else; and I certainly do like him, and think he will have a career, if only we can get him to London.

' I quite agree with Major Westmorland's determination to take his dismissal as final.

' We are in really great trouble just now, so much so that I find it quite hard to write to you on other subjects. You remember Hope Merrion, Muriel's great friend, whom you admired so much? She is dying, they fear, of scarlet fever, caught from her little nephew, whom she was helping to nurse, at Dalby Sands. She took the complaint very severely, but they did not dread fatal consequences till two days back, when she had a bad relapse: weak as she is, they seem to fear the

worst. Muriel is wild to go to her, but I dare not let her. She has never had the fever, and she is my only one. I feel I should not be justified in running such a risk, short of absolute necessity.'

Some minutes after laying down this letter, Evelyn became vaguely aware that his father was talking to him.

'Don't you even hear when you are spoken to?' cried the invalid, irritably.

'I did not hear—no!' said Evelyn, huskily.

'I really never met your equal for stupidity. I was talking of that lovely girl, Miss Merrion. There was a woman indeed! No foolish little doll, to change her mind fifty times a day, but a woman to live and die for! And for some trumpery reason you disliked her.'

'I was under a misapprehension,' said the Major, turning and pacing restlessly down the room. Then, his misery becom-

ing suddenly too great for control, he dashed away out of the room, out of the house, into the garden, down the terraced slopes, never stopping until he stood by the rapid river-side, looking, half-maddened, on the quickly-flowing water.

It was too much, at last: this was the final blow; if Hope died, there was no longer anything in the world to live for. Perhaps even now she was really dead—he thought of his dream at Leaming, of the blows which he had heard clash upon her coffin. He looked all around, at the scenes so familiar to him since boyhood, with a sensation of having done with them all. He was in the mood in which men lay violent hands on themselves. To his over-wrought imagination, he seemed to be weary of struggling against fate: the doom was stronger than he. The prophecy should be accomplished, and his must be the hand.

‘Withouten Hope it shulde betyde.’

Yes, without Hope. If she died, he would not live, he mutely swore: and the agony that shook him told him what was the intensity of his love.

A scuffling and a quick, asthmatical breathing near made him look round. It was Larrie, his dear old Skye, his barrack friend and companion, who, divining in his loving canine heart something of his master's trouble, had followed him with groans and panting down to the water-side, and now ran to him, placing his aged and faithful forepaws on his leg, and looking at him with dim eyes of exceeding affection and sympathy.

Into Evelyn's heart flashed the quick remembrance of the scene in the hall at Leaming the morning that Hope and Tom arranged the dogs, and old Larrie amongst them, in a circle. He thought of the joyous laughter, the sparkling health, the

defiant pride of the girl as she stood—of her grace, her beauty, her matchless, unspeakable charm. And now she was dying, or dead. Oh, it was manifestly impossible ! Hope cannot die !

He picked Larrie up, hugging him against his sore heart ; and, as he did so, a thought struck him like a spur, pricking him onwards.

‘I will go and see,’ he said to himself, ‘whether she is alive or no ; and if she is not . . .’

He merely told his father he must go to London, and for once in his life regardless of his complaints at being left alone, he ordered the trap, and went straight off to the station to catch the up train.

Some years afterwards—or so it seemed to him—he was standing before the door of the house wherein she lay. There was no need to inquire the number : the straw

in the road, the muffled knocker, told their own tale. As he rang, a deathly sickness seemed to come over him. What hung upon this moment! He dared not think.

When the door softly opened, he could scarcely control himself to pronounce her name.

‘I am happy to tell you, sir, that Miss Merrion was declared to be out of danger last night: she is as weak as it is possible to be, but conscious, and likely to do well.’

He put out his hand against the wall to steady himself.

‘That is—good news,’ he faltered.

‘Yes, sir. Lady Caroline Loftus arrived yesterday from Ireland, and directly she was in the room, Miss Merrion took a turn for the better.’

‘I am much obliged to you. No—no name!’ as she held a small tray for his

card. ‘Good afternoon!’ and he was gone.

Bowen—for Bowen it was—smiled grimly.

‘You may not know my face, but I know yours, Major Westmorland,’ she soliloquised, as she gently closed the door.

## CHAPTER X.

## THE CONVALESCENT HOME.

O heart, how fares it with thee now,  
That thou shouldst fail from thy desire,  
Who scarcely darest to inquire,  
'What is it makes me beat so low ?'  
Something it is which thou hast lost,  
Some pleasure from thine early years.

TENNYSON.

HUMANLY speaking, Lady Caroline Loftus might be said to have saved Hope's life. It was she, it will be remembered, who took the girl to Ceylon when she went to spend the winter with her younger brother Herbert.

Since then, a sister-in-law in weak health

and poor circumstances had claimed the loving and ready services of Lady Caroline, who had been in Ireland, and had not seen her favourite Hope since their voyage home to England together. When she heard, however, of the illness of her beloved child, she had packed up at once, and hurried over as fast as boats and trains could take her.

She arrived just in time. Hope had allowed herself to slip so near to the shadowy land that it seemed as if a breath would be enough to extinguish the flickering flame of her life. The sudden appearance of the friend whom she loved so well, just gave the impetus required—just aroused her, in her utter weakness, to conceive a faint wish not to die.

Lady Caroline was a handsome, dark-eyed woman, no longer young, though still attractive. A tragic romance lay behind in her past, and perhaps the true friend-

ship shown to her at a critical time by Hope's mother, had something to do with her warm affection for Hope herself. She was a woman of splendid vitality, and her presence seemed to transform the house. She devoted herself to both the invalids, Hope and Mabel, and under her cheery *régime* they gained rapidly in health and strength.

When it came to be a question of moving them, Lady Caroline had a plan to propose. Some friends of hers, going abroad for the winter, had made her the offer of their pretty cottage at Varling, a village near the Welsh hills. Servants and pony-carriage were all at her disposal until April, if she cared to have them. She had scarcely contemplated accepting the offer until she came to Dalby Sands; but now it seemed to her that a winter of quiet and pure air, with good nursing and petting, was the very thing for the frail white-faced

young creature whose face struck a nameless feeling of pain into her tender heart every time she looked at it.

Mabel should come too, for some weeks, until her health was firmly established, but she progressed far more satisfactorily than Hope, though the latter was now almost as determined to get well as the former could be.

The Frederic Merrions' circumstances were not in a very enviable condition. For the next two or three years they would have to live very quietly, and retrench in every direction; in fact, only Hope's generous loan enabled them to tide over the crisis. Her generosity left her with only a very small income for the present, and half of this she proposed to pay Bertha for the privilege of living with them and teaching little Adeline.

It was this apparently depressing state

of things which was largely responsible for her greater eagerness to be quite strong again. She was to have a chance of being of use. She was to live with Bertha and teach Adeline. She did not like Bertha, and had always a special horror of instructing; in this way did she long to emulate the self-abnegation of Mabel Thorpe.

Mabel herself was unconcernedly told by Mrs. Merrion that she should have no further occasion for her services; and this was a subject of so much distress to Hope that, when Lady Caroline broached the idea of her cottage 'on the Marches,' she hailed it with acclamation. Caroline was much interested in anything in the shape of a romance, and meant to invite Arthur Strange also, for a week to her convalescent home, as she called it.

As soon, therefore, as Dr. Humbey—reluctantly, it must be admitted—allowed

that Hope was well enough to travel, the three started with Bowen in attendance, and, after a night in London, arrived at Varling on an afternoon of soft sunshine at the beginning of November, when all the trees on all the hills were in their later stage of decaying splendour.

They were all in a mood to find the place pretty, but it outran their expectations. It was snug, well-built, well-warmed. It stood high, but was placed cosily. The drawing-room had a south aspect, with a window in the western wall, through which the setting of the sun beyond the 'far blue hills' was distinctly visible. The two maids were amiable and friendly, and the garden-boy, who on occasion donned livery and drove the pony, met them with broad smiles of welcome. Everything that the kind owners could think of for their comfort, had been done: the really good piano was in tune, as Lady Caroline delightedly

discovered, and the best families in the neighbourhood had been asked to call upon them, lest they should feel their rural seclusion somewhat too much of a good thing.

This last item was joyful news for the hostess, who was eminently sociable and by no means fond of solitude. Hope was not quite so charmed. She felt inclined to remain for a time 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot,'

She had a new and curious disinclination to see people—a feeling which Lady Caroline was quite determined to dissipate, before it grew too strong.

She knew quite well that something had gone wrong with Hope, and when first she saw her had wondered, with much dismay, whether she could possibly be regretting her break with Disney. This idea was dispelled soon, when the girl, as if in relief at pouring out her heart to someone who

had known the story, told her of the shock it had been to hear of Nellie Wetherell's death, and of her seeing her grave at Leaming. By the way she alluded to the whole affair, her astute friend knew well that her only feeling was thankfulness at being free of the engagement, shame at having entered into it.

She made no attempt to force her confidence, knowing quite well that, if Hope meant to tell her, she would do so without being urged, and that, if she had decided not to, she would not change her decision.

She had an idea that Bowen knew, an idea acquired she scarcely knew how. But even had she felt inclined to question the maid, which was far from being the case, she felt that it would be worse than useless; Bowen would guard her young mistress's secret at any cost. Since the danger of losing her, the woman's love was touching in its devotion. She watched

her jealously, detecting the first signs of fatigue, regular as a machine with tonics and beef-tea, and ubiquitous in halls and passages, armed with wraps. She loved Lady Caroline, because Lady Caroline loved Hope, and would do anything for her.

‘Maiden ladies living in the country, seem to me to lead a most luxurious life!’ cried Hope, merrily, one morning as she sat in the drawing-room eating her soup, while Lady Caroline wrote letters, and Mabel trimmed herself a hat.

‘They don’t all live in Convalescent Homes,’ laughed Mabel.

‘Ah, no! But what a bad training this is for me, now that I am just starting on my new way of life,’ said Hope, gravely. ‘This is no preparation for turning and dyeing my gowns, riding in omnibuses, and going third-class everywhere. Why do you look so mournfully at me, Mabel?’

‘I can’t fancy you, somehow! I wonder if you have counted the cost of going third-class everywhere.’

‘Why should I mind?’ said Hope, intrepidly. ‘I believe you think much more seriously of it than I do!’

‘Of course,’ was Mabel’s quiet answer, ‘because I know from experience the meaning of “going third-class everywhere,” and you don’t. Daughters of rich men fear poverty much less than daughters of poor men, just simply because they don’t know what they are talking of.’

‘Very sensible,’ observed Lady Caroline, from her writing-table. ‘Hope—don’t talk nonsense!’

‘It’s not in the least, nonsense,’ maintained Hope, in high dudgeon. ‘I know quite well what it means. You give one and elevenpence halfpenny for your gloves, and if you go to the theatre, you go in your hat, and you live in West Kensing-

ton and dine early. I shan't mind any of that.'

Mabel laughed again.

' Nobody could make you realise it,' she said, with an air of superior knowledge which provoked Hope beyond measure.

' Wait till you have seen me try ; I will make you both own that you misjudge me !' she cried. ' If Carina were not so foolish about my not being strong yet, I would start for London to-morrow, to help Bertha get into her new house !'

' I should,' said Lady Caroline, without turning round. ' You look just about fit to be carrying furniture about. Dear me !' suddenly. ' We have a visitor ! The vicar of the parish is evidently about to leave his card !'

As she spoke, a slight, clerical-looking figure passed the window, and Mabel, looking up, gave a cry, and started to her feet.

‘ Oh, Lady Caroline! It is Arthur !’

‘ What !’ Her ladyship faced round, and gave a keen look into the blushing, transfigured face.

‘ Well, my dear, you had better go and let in Mr. Strange ; and if by any chance you should have anything of a private nature to say to him, there is the dining-room, you know.’

Mabel, after one rapturous look at Hope, bounded to the door.

‘ I can’t understand it !’ she panted. ‘ How can he afford the time or the money to come here ?’ and she was gone, closing the door behind her.

The house was so still that they could not help hearing the quick accents of the masculine voice, and the girl’s sobbing cry of ‘ Arthur !’

Then the dining-room door was heard to shut, and silence reigned.

Hope lay on her sofa with closed eyes. She was not strong enough to bear much emotion, and a nameless desolation had crept over her as she heard that thrilling cry.

How beautiful to love like that!

She almost wished that it had been in her power to give Gilbert Greville what he craved.

He had begged so hard to see her before she left Dalby Sands, but she had been firm in her refusal.

She had written to him a little note of gratitude for his gifts of flowers, and his great kindness during her illness.: a note of what Mrs. Browning calls 'gelid sweetness.'

It left no loophole for any man, however besotted, to dream the writer could be in love with him. She liked him too well to trifle with him. She had no love in her

heart, she told herself; but the face of Mabel Thorpe, as she caught sight of her lover, seemed to fill Hope with a tremulous unrest which caused tears to gather in the large eyes, larger now than ever in the wan little face.

‘Poor child!’ said Carina, tenderly.

She meant Mabel, not Hope.

‘She looked so pleased, so transformed, when she caught sight of his face, she was really pretty at that moment,’ she went on.

As she spoke, the dining-room door was vehemently thrown open, flying steps crossed the hall, and Mabel Thorpe burst in, in tears, rushed across the room, cast herself on her knees by Hope’s sofa, flung her arms about her, and, burying her face in her neck, sobbed aloud.

‘Mercy on me! What’s to do now?’ cried Lady Caroline, addressing her highly pardonable enquiry to the young priest

who followed Mabel, and stood, half uncertainly, in the doorway.

His illumined expression seemed to show that the 'to-do' was of no woeful origin ; but his voice was apparently not perfectly under control, for he made more than one ineffectual effort to speak, and after all it was Mabel who first found her voice.

What she said was at first so entirely incoherent that nothing could be gathered from it except that she was in a state of extravagant gratitude to Hope for something she had done.

Hope, also in tears, for she was very weak, was disclaiming, and saying there was nothing to thank her for ; till Lady Caroline, with firmness, went up to the inarticulate pair and drew Mabel away.

'My dear child, you must consider Hope, she is not at all strong yet ! Now, do tell us what it is.'

'I am very sorry to take it so badly,'

gasped Mabel, who was trembling. ‘I am ridiculous, I know, but it seems to me that joy is harder to take quietly than grief! It is all through Hope; God will make her happy, I know, as happy as I am now, because she thought of me, felt for me, helped me so! ’

‘Oh, Mabel, indeed you make me feel ashamed, dear,’ cried Hope, deprecatingly. ‘I did nothing, nothing! I only just mentioned you to Mollie, to Mr. Lyster! It is he alone who should be thanked.’

‘He told me,’ said Arthur, speaking for the first time, ‘that he did it for your sake.’

Hope held out her hand.

‘I am very glad to know you; I think you a most fortunate man,’ she said.

‘Fortunate! you are right,’ he replied, all his heart in his eyes as they rested on Mabel. ‘Now that I can offer her a home, I have nothing to wish for.’

‘Now tell us all about it, sensibly,’ interrupted Lady Caroline, ‘for I am completely in the dark. There never was a more bewildered woman than I am at this moment! What has happened? what has Mr. Lyster done for Hope’s sake?’

Then Arthur Strange told his story. He had been four days at Leaming, staying with Mollie, and liked him, and Mr. Wetherell, and the parish and everything. It was arranged that he was to take sole charge at Christmas whilst Mr. and Mrs. Wetherell went south, to try and re-establish the old man’s health.

‘And he wants me to bring my wife, and to live at the vicarage whilst we are getting our home ready,’ he said, his eyes fixed upon the usually self-possessed Mabel, who was childishly hiding her face against Lady Caroline.

This was quick work. It left Mabel not much more than a month in which to make

her preparations for matrimony, and Arthur said her mother thought she ought to come home in a week at latest.

Hope and Lady Caroline threw themselves into all the plans with eager interest. To Mabel, this sudden realization of all her most unlikely dreams seemed too good to be true. It took a long, long *tête-à-tête* with her Arthur to in any degree compose her agitation.

Hope wrote a most grateful and affectionate letter to Mollie, telling him that to him she owed one of the purest moments of happiness that her life had ever known. He replied that young Strange was a splendid fellow, and it was a pleasure to be able to help him.

His letter was long and chatty, and told of all the little pieces of news which he thought might interest her. One bit of intelligence which was included in it was indeed news, and contained food for much

reflection. It had been, for some reason known to herself, excluded carefully from Muriel's letters. This was the announcement of the breaking of Evelyn's engagement.

## CHAPTER XI.

## IN THE MUDDY LANES.

Should I fear to greet my friend,  
Or to say, ' Forgive the wrong,'  
Or to ask her, ' Take me, sweet,  
To the regions of thy rest '?

TENNYSON.

IT had rained for three days almost without intermission, and to Evelyn Westmorland it seemed as if it never would stop.

He stood before the hall window with Larrie in his arms, gazing down the valley at the swollen, swirling waters of the Bourne, as it rushed past, heavy and dark with peat washed down from the hills.

The old butler was laying lunch in the subdued and melancholy manner in which it seemed the fashion to do everything at Feverell.

Near a roaring fire, old Mr. Westmorland reclined on his invalid couch. His paralysis was increasing slowly but surely, and, though he had speedily recovered his full powers of articulation, his lower limbs seemed to become weaker every day. With his speech, his features had righted themselves, but his countenance was so bloodless, and his face so thin and sharp, that it looked like an ivory mask.

The hall was very hot—too hot, for the day was mild, though damp; yet the couch was drawn as close to the chimney-corner as it could conveniently be placed. On a table near lay a heap of books and periodicals—the old favourites of this man of letters: Shelley, Keats, the Essays of Elia, Dryden, and Milton's prose. With these,

a heap of latter-day and ephemeral celebrities, archaeological pamphlets, reviews, political *brochures*.

All of them failed to interest now. On the chiselled face was a strange, somewhat horrible look—the look of a man who has yielded himself a slave to superstition. He had reached the lowest depth of fatalism: resentment against Evelyn was dying out—pity at his hard lot was taking its place. What use to seek to frustrate the workings of Fate? What were he and his son but victims—passive victims—of the wrong done by their ancestors in remote generations? How explain Evelyn's curious lack of a desire for marriage, but by the fact that his destiny was too strong for him?

To the old man's diseased imagination, the Curse seemed to have been working traceably for years and years up to this very point.

This remote visiting of the sins of the fathers upon the children had been discovered, he reflected, long ages ago by those wise old Greeks, who seemed to discern all truth, howsoever darkly.

' What meant the woes on Tantalus entailed,  
Or the dark sorrows of the line of Thebes?  
Fictions in fact, but in their substance truths,  
Tremendous truths !'

Mr. Westmorland had thought out the whole tragedy in his own mind, and had decided that his son would die on the first of March, leaving only himself to fade slowly out of existence in the empty halls of this old Chase, which three generations back had been the gayest, most open house in the county.

On this pleasing consummation his mind loved to dwell, and Evelyn was powerless to divert his thoughts. He could not even induce him to leave home, though his doctor strongly urged him to go to Mal-

vern for the strengthening of his limbs. Evelyn had come to the conclusion that the only thing to do was to stay quietly at home until the fatal date was past. If the horrors of anticipation did not kill his father, he might perhaps take a turn for the better afterwards.

The room was very quiet. The dogs, overpowered by heat, lay extended on the floor in various directions: old Larrie's asthmatical cough alone broke the silence.

At last Mr. Westmorland spoke.

'I wish to goodness you would take that brute out of the room, Evelyn! How often am I to tell you that I cannot endure the noise he makes?'

'It's the damp,' said Evelyn, slowly, turning from the window like one awakened from a dream, and caressing the terrier's head.

‘I must request that you turn him out of the room,’ fretted the invalid.

‘I’m going myself to the stables. The rain has stopped. I’ll ride over to Winstanton this afternoon, and tell the vet. to give me something for his cough.’

He went out, wandered down the passages to the housekeeper’s room, and left Larrie in the loving care of Mrs. Middleton, the old housekeeper; then, turning up his coat-collar, and thrusting a cloth cap on his short, black locks, he repaired to the stables to order his horse.

Of late he seemed to care to ride only one horse, the black hunter which had carried Hope across Limmerdale.

Mounted on this animal, he started for Winstanton directly after lunch.

‘I suppose you won’t be back before night?’ snapped his father, as he took leave.

‘ I will be as quick as I can : I have not been out for three days, you know. If I see Hammond (the agent), shall I send him up to keep you company ? ’

‘ Certainly not. I won’t see him.’

‘ Well, I must look sharp, I suppose ; good-bye. You have all you want ? ’

No answer. Evelyn departed, telling Farren, who was going upstairs, to look in upon the master at frequent intervals.

It was not raining : the clouds were higher and of a more broken description, though still the whole sky was grey.

December was advancing, and the leaves were all down : the country was dreary and desolate.

The Major’s meditations, when alone, were always on one subject, and to-day was no exception to the rule. He thought continually of Hope, and of the fatal misunderstanding between them, and of her illness, and, more than all, of the day on

the moors together, when it had been his privilege to serve her.

He wondered what she was doing now, wearying his brain with conjectures as to her whereabouts. A desire had had possession of his soul ever since his first meeting with Disney, and discovery of the hateful injustice he had done her. This was, for once to see her, face to face, and ask her to forgive him.

Would it be an unwarrantable intrusion —a liberty which she might resent, were he to ascertain her address, and go to her for this purpose? She might refuse to see him.

He had thought of writing, and in fact had more than once started a letter to her: but the aspect of his penitence on paper seemed so bare and meagre, compared with the mighty flood of his remorseful grief, that he dared not risk it. No lady, under the circumstances, could well do less

or more than to return a formal, polite, and stereotyped assurance of forgiveness, which he felt would be as a stone to his hungry heart, and not the bread for which he craved.

Some few details of the earlier stages of her convalescence, he had gathered from Mrs. Saxon's letters to his father: but the Saxons had gone to Italy in the beginning of November, and since then he had heard nothing.

He was beginning to feel that this absence of tidings was intolerable.

Every now and then, as he dragged through the weary hours at Feverell, the longing to see her became so strong as to be absolute torture. He would sit by the hour together in a reverie, recalling her words, her looks, her ways. The scent of violets always helped him to realize her, and he had manifested an interest in

the culture of Parma violets under glass, which had delighted and surprised the head gardener. He had now a little bunch of them in his button-hole: and all the way to Winstanton he was thinking of her, always of her, till his imagination grew bold, and he wove an airy castle in which she not only forgave him, but admitted him to her friendship; and he might have perhaps soared beyond even these heights, had he not arrived at the veterinary surgeon's door.

The short winter's day was waning as he turned homewards. A red light tinged the grey vapour on the western horizon. The country seemed so lonely and mournful that his heart sank within him, as all alone he rode through the muddy lanes. Even the sound of wheels in front of him, hidden by a turn in the high hedges, was welcome. Soon he came in sight of a

basket pony-carriage, trotting briskly along, driven by a lady, with another lady at her side, and a small solemn groom in livery perched up behind.

He eyed them keenly as he rode up, wondering who they were, for most of the residents in the neighbourhood were of course known to him by sight: but certainly the lady driving was a stranger, for he could see her profile as she turned smiling to her companion. She seemed to tell her to look at the red light in the west, for the other, who was much muffled in furs, raised herself a little, and something in the way she moved her head made the Major start ridiculously: for he thought it was like Hope Merrion.

His mind was always so full of her that such a fancy was most natural. Yet, as he quickly gained upon the stout pony, he could not resist turning to look again at

this unknown girl. The unwonted sound of horse's hoofs, and the sight of a tall horse and rider passing in the lane, made her glance round.

Their eyes met, and it seemed to Evelyn as if the atmosphere of the globe had suddenly become impossible to breathe; as if the murky fields and leafless trees whirled round in a mystic dance. His horse had carried him a good way past the little chaise before he recovered enough to pull up and turn round.

Yes, it was she—his Lady.

Hope had made some sort of exclamation which caused Lady Caroline to check the pony, while gazing in a puzzled way at the girl's face, which seemed to have caught the reflection of the sky and to flame with sudden red.

'What a magnificent man! Do you know him?' murmured she, as he came

towards them : and Hope with, as it seemed to her, the last particle of force in her body, replied in stifled tones :

‘ It is Major Westmorland.’

To his own great satisfaction and astonishment, he found himself capable of raising his cap, and saying,

‘ How do you do?’

Hope bowed—yes ! it was true.

She looked confused, certainly, but she did not cut him, nor even show any very obvious displeasure at sight of him. She found voice to murmur, very low, ‘ Lady Caroline Loftus.’ He heard it ; he thought her faintest whisper would have power to arouse him from sleep or death. He bowed to the keen-eyed lady, whose ready speech at once filled in the thrilling pause.

‘ Major Westmorland ! I have often heard of you. I am very pleased to meet

you. Are you staying in this part of the world ?'

' My home is here,' he answered, hearing the hammering of his own heart more plainly than his words. ' I live at Feverell—about four miles from this. Are *you* staying hereabouts ?'

' Yes ; we are wintering together, Miss Merrion and I, at Varling.'

' With the Gardiners ? I thought they were abroad.'

' They have given me the use of their house.'

It was incredible ; the tumult of his mind augmented.

Not only was he at this moment seeing her, addressing her, but she was fixed within a few miles of him. What had he done to deserve such happiness as this ?

He devoured her with his eyes—the

white face, the thin cheeks, the sad mouth.

‘I hope you are feeling better?’ he said, stiffly.

‘She is mending most satisfactorily,’ answered Lady Caroline for her, ‘but I dare not risk keeping her out any longer in this damp. We are just going home to tea: will you come on with us and have some? It is such a cheerless evening!’

Would he come?

He never hesitated. For the first time he forgot his father, forgot his promise to be home early, forgot everything in the universe except the one fact that he was riding beside Hope—that he was in her presence. So far this was enough, if not too much, of bliss.

It was strange how, once free of the burden of his engagement to Leo, all idea of her seemed to have left his mind. She

might as well have never existed, for all he thought of her now.

But Hope wondered if he was grieving: he looked so worn and depressed. As he walked the great horse beside them, replying gravely and sparingly to Carina's easy, bright talk, she was speculating as to how hard the blow had fallen: and whether he was heart-broken.

Bowen, who was waiting somewhat anxiously for Miss Merrion's return, smiled within herself as she saw the large outline of the Major and his horse loom up in the twilight.

The usually slow Evelyn had dismounted in an instant to-night, in time to help Hope out of the pony-carriage.

It seemed impossible to believe that it was really he himself: across his memory flashed the recollection of his carrying her over the stream, in the pelting, thunder

rain. How wee her hand seemed in his own !

As she stood on the threshold, she turned her face up to him, and asked softly,

‘ Is that the horse I rode ?’ and he answered gently,

‘ Yes.’

There seemed nothing of her when Bowen had carried away the heavy furs which enveloped her, and the absence of her hat revealed a crop of short, silky curls all over her head. The tears started to his eyes, as she sat down in the nook of a big, cosy sofa, and leaned back as though tired out.

‘ You are not strong,’ he said, in tones gruff with concealed feeling.

‘ Oh, she is getting on with great strides,’ cried Lady Caroline, laying aside her own furs, and seating herself at the gipsy tea-

table. 'If I could only get her to sleep at nights, I should be quite happy; I take her into the open air as much as possible.'

Evelyn stood erect on the fur hearth-rug, looking round with a nameless enjoyment at the bright, attractive room, full of feminine trifles. How seductive a thing was afternoon tea, after the dreary chill outside! How it warmed the solitary fellow's heart to be here—here, with Hope, who was not unkind—was not even cold to him. He had the unspeakable honour of arranging, by Lady Caroline's request, a small table at Miss Merrion's elbow, and placing her cup and plate thereon: but he noticed that she scarcely ate a mouthful.

Lady Caroline talked so much, and so naturally, that he had time to collect himself and steady his nerves, and was able

to join quite rationally in the talk, when called upon to do so.

‘What is it smells so deliciously?’ cried she. ‘Just like violets! I could declare there were violets in the room.’

‘They are in my coat,’ said he.

‘Oh! So they are! How delicious! Hope, was it not only yesterday we were longing for violets? There are none to be had in Winstanton, for love or money.’

‘I grow them at Feverell,’ he eagerly broke in. ‘I will send you as many as you like, if you will accept them. In the meantime, will you object to these? They are rather faded, I’m afraid, but they will soon freshen up in water.’

Putting down his tea-cup on the mantelpiece, he detached the flowers from his button-hole, and laid them by Lady Caroline’s plate. Hope thought no action of his had ever so become him. Timidly she

allowed her eyes to rest upon him, as he received thanks from her ladyship: and the result of her scrutiny was puzzling.

He looked ill, to her, who had seen him before his unlucky engagement. She remembered how entirely vigorous and healthy she had thought him—what a robust specimen of manhood. Now there was an indescribable change, which, by some mysterious means, had lent an added delicacy to the features, a depth to the eyes, which had not before been there. How much would she have given to know his thoughts: if he was glad to be there, whether his mood towards herself was bitter, as on the starlight night in the garden, or gentle as when he had held her hand and soothed her in the charcoal-burner's hut. Ah, what a keen flood of memories the sight of him called into being! The black, wild, stormy moor was present to her imagination, and the picture

of that dark head as she had seen it last, the rain drenching it as it moved beside her horse, its outline growing ever less distinct in the gathering night; and the

‘ Resolute shoulders, each butting away  
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray.’

Then, for a brief hour in that perilous time, these two had cast away convention, and faced each other, man and woman, drawn together by the pressure of a common danger. Could this quiet polished gentleman, with his subdued voice and gentle manner, be the man who had forcibly wrapped her in his coat? who had gazed on her opening eyes with an expression in his own which had well-nigh stopped the beating of her heart? who had caught her in his arms and cried, ‘ I am stronger than you, and I will make you do it!’? Ah! it could not come over again. It had required much to call the fire from the

flint. Now it was, to all appearance, cold again.

That sharp striking together of their two bare souls could not repeat itself, she reflected, sadly ; and then she wondered why such reflections should sadden her. Was it because, amidst so much that was heartless, so much that seemed wasted in her life, there had flashed suddenly upon her soul a revelation of light—a perception of that great strength of a strong man which all women unconsciously desire to know ?

It was almost as though some huge flood had furiously driven her against a giant rock, and by its very violence held her there so that she could feel its massive strength ; but, as the tempestuous waves abated, she had fallen away again, and now lay on the sands below, safe from storm, but out of reach of the mighty rock which had befriended her.

So dreamed the girl, gazing absently into the clear fire, till startled from her reverie by what Lady Caroline was saying as she chatted gaily on :

‘I had another patient in my convalescent home,’ she said, ‘a Miss Thorpe. She has gone home to make ready for her wedding. There is quite an epidemic of marrying and giving in marriage just now. Miss Merrion heard only this morning from a friend of hers that she is engaged. By-the-by, you must have met her, she was at Leaming—a Miss Forde! And the curious thing is, that she is to marry a man that we knew in Colombo—a Captain Disney !’

So blythely, Lady Caroline, unknowing what a hornet’s nest she was putting her hand into! Hope could not have looked at Westmorland had her life depended upon it. Had she done so, she would have seen that he was quietly smiling.

‘Disney is a friend of mine: we were in the same regiment,’ she heard him saying composedly: and then, Lady Caroline proceeding to ply him with questions, he answered them all unconcernedly, showing not the slightest confusion, even when asked if he liked Miss Forde.

Hope could hardly believe her ears.

He did not make a very long visit; his father would be missing him, he said.

‘You may have heard how ill he has been,’ he added to Hope.

As soon as he was gone. Lady Caroline fell into raptures over him. So unlike the usual run of young men!

‘I did like that simple, manly way in which he said his father would be missing him. I am charmed to think he is within reach,’ said she, sniffing at her violets with great satisfaction. ‘As you know, it is always to my taste to have a nice young man available,’ she added, laughing. ‘And

he lives with his father and takes care of him ! How particularly picturesque of him ! But you never told me how handsome and well-mannered he is ! You never described him in the least.'

Hope gave no answer. She herself was wondering at Evelyn's beauty and courtesy. Surely he was changed from the morose, discontented fellow she remembered ? What a strange being he must be ! His *fiancée* had coolly thrown him over only a month or two ago and was now going to marry another man ; yet she had never seen him so interesting.

' The Major looks a trifle different to-night, to what he did last time I see him,' remarked Bowen, with grim humour, when Miss Merrion came up to dress for dinner.

' When was that ?' asked Hope, absently thinking of Leaming.

' On the doorstep of Marine Parade,

Dalby Sands, which heaven be thanked we're out of, and I hope never to set foot in no more.'

'Bowen, you must be dreaming! You saw Major Westmorland at Dalby Sands? What are you thinking of?'

'Either him or his ghostie come to enquire how you was, miss, for I answered the door myself. The day Dr. Humbey said you'd pull through, 'twas. "No—no name," says he, not recognizing me, as was natural. But I think I know Major Westmorland when I see him.'

## CHAPTER XII.

## ABSOLUTION.

‘ May God judge me so,’  
He said at last.—‘ I came convicted here,  
And humbled sorely, if not enough. I came,  
Because this woman, from her crystal soul  
Had shown me something which a man calls light :  
Because, too, formerly, I sinned by her  
As then and ever since I have, by God,  
Through arrogance of nature—though I loved . . .  
Whom best, I need not say, since that is writ  
Too plainly in the book of my misdeeds :  
And thus I came here to abase myself,  
And fasten, kneeling, on her regent brows  
A garland which I startled thence one day  
Of her beautiful June-youth.’

E. B. BROWNING.

IT was seven o’clock when Evelyn rode into the stable yard: and when, twenty minutes later, he hurried into the little

blue drawing-room, as they called it, his father sat there in awful state, his aspect giving warning of stormy weather.

‘I am glad the veterinary surgeon’s conversation was so entralling,’ was his pleasant beginning; ‘but on a balmy night like this, one doubtless likes to linger out of doors, especially when there is nobody but a cross old man to come home to.’

‘Ah!’ said Evelyn, so cheerily that his father looked suddenly up at him, ‘I was better employed than in talking to the vet. or dawdling about in the mist. I met friends, and have been out to tea.’

‘Oh, indeed!’

This going out to tea was so unlike Evelyn’s usual proceedings, that Mr. Westmorland’s flow of complaint was quite checked, and he waited in silence to hear more.

‘Somebody that I never expected to

see,' went on his son, 'and a great favourite of yours, father. Miss Merrion.'

'Miss Merrion! What in the world is she doing here?'

The Major explained, leaning his broad back against the mantel-piece, and basking in the warmth.

'And, please, father, I want you to ask them to dinner,' was his astounding conclusion.

'What next, I wonder? I am totally unfit to see company. And you declared to me once that you had special reasons for disliking Miss Merrion.'

'Yes, that was a mistake,' said Evelyn, frankly. 'I behaved very badly: I was very rude. You see, I want to show them a little civility, just as a sort of apology. I'll write the note to Lady Caroline myself—you shan't be bothered: and you will enjoy talking to her, it will cheer

you up. She has been everywhere, and plays beautifully.'

' Well, I don't know what to make of you; but I suppose you must have your way, as usual,' was the peevish and conspicuously unjust reply, 'only they must put up with me as I am: I am in no mood to entertain guests.'

' Dinner is served,' said the butler.

As soon as he could escape from table, Evelyn went and wrote his invitation. It seemed to him as if the burning desire to speak to Hope, to crave her pardon, would consume him unless speedily satisfied. How strange it had seemed to stand in the same room with her, talking of ordinary subjects, like any chance acquaintance meeting unexpectedly: when under the smooth surface there throbbed and thrilled such an ocean of passion and tenderness and regret.

Beyond reconciliation he would not, however, allow his winged thoughts to soar.

Having composed his note, he went to tell a man to carry it, and then down to the head gardener's lodge, rousing him from supper in the bosom of his family to proceed to the frames and gather violets with a lavish hand.

The invitation was for Thursday, this being Monday, and Evelyn added,

‘As we feel sure the night air is not good for Miss Merrion, we shall take the liberty of sending the brougham to fetch you. You said you could not get violets in Winstanton, so I am venturing to ask you to accept a few, with my kind regards to you and Miss Merrion.’

‘You must wait for an answer,’ said Evelyn to his messenger: and spent the interval between his going and returning in a state of trepidation which aroused his

own scorn. He could scarcely believe his good fortune when he held Lady Caroline's note of cordial acceptance in his hand.

The retainers at Feverell thought that the young master was out of his senses when the day arrived, so fidgety and exacting was he over the preparations.

Fires roared the whole day in the large drawing-room and in the dining-room, both rooms being seldom used by the two men, and Evelyn being terribly afraid lest his fragile little love should take a chill.

He had spent the intervening days chiefly in riding about the neighbouring lanes in pursuit of the Varling pony-carriage, but had not had the good fortune to encounter it. His suspense made him so restless that he was a burden to himself and all around him.

He insisted on the production of all the antique silver table decorations, 'just as if

it was a dinner-party of eighteen,' as the old butler somewhat crossly remarked. He devastated the conservatory to try to produce floral effects such as he had seen at Hesselburgh, and laboured long with Mrs. Middleton, in the seclusion of her sitting-room, to arrange the priceless vases with something approaching an artistic result.

'Bless his heart, I ain't seen him so interested in anything since he was a boy,' said the old lady to Farren. 'Is the ladies that's coming young?'

'Miss Merrion's a beauty,' replied Farren, 'but I never noticed as he was sweet upon her, myself.'

'I wish he might be; seems a shame for such as him to be single, don't it?' said Mrs. Middleton, sympathetically.

The Major was dressed and downstairs more than half-an-hour before the ladies could possibly arrive. When his father

was wheeled into the room, he was whistling a tune, and making old Larrie dance to it, holding him by his fore-paws.

When at last the bell was heard, he sobered instantly. His fictitious gaiety ceased, and his fears got the better of him.

He stood up, grave and still, counting his own heart-beats till the door was seen to open, and Lady Caroline rustled in, looking charming in black lace and poinsettias.

For just one awful moment he thought she was alone ; but, as he started forward with the enquiry on his lips, Miss Merrion came slowly in, and walked up the long room.

She did not seem to see him, going straight to his father's invalid chair.

He had never seen her so stately, or so beautiful. The childish creature, with her

soft curls, who had sat on the sofa in the firelight at Varling, seemed to have vanished utterly.

She was in grey, pale, pearl grey, with a long train. There was a dash of deep, poppy-red somewhere about her, which seemed to make her glow and sparkle like the deep heart of a rose.

She wore just a faint smile as she saluted her host, thanked him for his enquiries after her health, and assured him that she was better.

‘ You find me a sad cripple,’ he said, with a sigh, ‘ unable even to rise and greet my Queen of Beauty, but a sight of you is better than any amount of doctor’s stuff ; I may recover, now that you have deigned to visit me ! ’

‘ You retain all your power of pretty speaking,’ she answered, with a somewhat grave smile ; and then she turned slowly,

and as it seemed haughtily, to Evelyn, and gave him her hand.

‘It is good of you to come,’ he faltered, terribly disconcerted by this change, ‘good of you to have compassion on us in our loneliness.’

‘Lady Caroline likes going out,’ she answered, coldly, as she took the seat he offered ; and both accent and manner conveyed to his heavy heart the miserable impression that she had not wished to come.

It seemed to strike him suddenly mute. How could he make conversation under the circumstances ? All his faculties were centred on this terrible, unlooked-for turn of affairs. In what a fool’s paradise had he been living during the last few days ! He had imagined that proud Hope Merrion would consent to be friends with a man who had as good as told her

that he declined to associate with such as she. Madness, folly, and detestable presumption ! He might have seen how impossible was such an idea. Could she know, or guess at, his long and bitter repentance, or have any idea of his remorse ?

Often, in thought, he had imagined himself pleading to her, and had fancied her angry, indignant, as when she said she hated him, or kind and yielding as he had thought her at Varling. Never once had he forecast this civil calm which seemed to weigh him down ; to 'front unuttered words, and say them nay ;' to leave him helpless and hopeless, without pardon and without excuse.

He recovered himself in a minute or two, enough to obey Lady Caroline's smiling invitation, and go and seat himself beside her.

' You see, I have some of your violets,'

she said ; 'our cottage is fragrant with them.'

He said, vaguely, that he was glad ; but failed to find any more original reply. It was as if his heart must burst at the gulf which had suddenly opened between himself and Hope. The announcement of dinner at the moment was a sort of relief. It gave him something definite to do in the way of wheeling his father's chair down the corridor into the dining-room.

Mr. Westmorland was a charming host ; never seen, in fact, quite to perfection but when he was entertaining in his own house. He seemed exactly to match its heavy, massive antiquity ; to be a fit lord of docile, perfectly-trained, noiseless servants. Lady Caroline was profoundly impressed by the whole *mise-en-scène*—the haunch and the game, all reared and killed on the estate ; the rare old wine, laid down by ancestral Westmorlands in those very

cellars ; the great deer-hounds basking on the hearth ; the aristocratic father and his handsome son. She could not help fancying that Hope was impressed too : and began to wonder whether, after all, little Adeline would have much of her aunt's instruction.

Mr. Westmorland really enjoyed his visitors, as Evelyn had been sure he would, when they were there. He was animated and interesting — a different creature from the peevish, venomous old man who was Evelyn's daily companion.

The Major was always conspicuously silent in his father's presence. It was as though the sparkling current of small talk froze his own tongue. Lady Caroline, however, saved him the trouble of speaking much ; she was a chatter-box, and liked nothing better than a good audience. She rattled away merrily at his side, while he strove desperately to give attention enough

to her to enable him to say yes and no at the right time, while all the while his face, turned towards his left, was longing ever to turn to his right, where Hope sat. . He felt, rather than saw, that she never looked his way unless pointedly appealed to by Lady Caroline. She was giving all her attention to his father.

His sufferings grew and grew as the dinner progressed. How had he looked forward to this evening—counted the minutes during the days that preceded it, wearied through the night-watches—thinking how cruel was the time that kept him from her. Compared with his present blank misery, those waiting days had been a miracle of happiness. He began to feel a kind of indignation against her. She had no right to mock him, to deceive him as she had done on Monday, by a hollow show of friendly greeting. Was she afraid he thought that all was right between

them—that he meant to offer no apology? He determined, with all the force of his will, that he would that very night end this horrible suspense, compel her to listen to him whilst he humbled himself before her.

After making that resolution, he grew stronger. He felt that he was a man, and that no noble-minded woman would turn away from a sincere penitent.

At least she should not misjudge him: she should know now what full justice he did her in his thoughts; he owed it to himself to let her hear that. Meanwhile, he would bide his time. She was intending him to see that she thought he had no right to speak to her: he allowed the justice of the sentence, for the present.

Mr. Westmorland talked of the Women's Sanitary League and of Tom Saxon, and Hope told how he had faithfully and con-

tinually written to her all through her illness, but she was afraid she was now being gradually supplanted by the beautiful young daughter of a Scotch earl near whom they had been staying in the Highlands. They talked, too, of the brilliant offer made to Richard Forde by Dr. Compton, of coming to London to be associated with himself, with a prospect of many glories in the future; and how the good folk of Norchester were so indignant at his loss that they had presented him with a magnificent testimonial, bitterly as, a year ago, they had resented his 'new-fangled innovations.' But now the ancient borough was become scientific; and the streets were to be lighted by electricity.

Snatches of the talk he caught, while Lady Caroline, to whom Norchester gossip was uninteresting, prattled of other things; and it seemed as though the dinner were

over before it had well begun, and they were repairing to the drawing-room again.

When coffee had been served, Mr. Westmorland begged Lady Caroline to play to him, and she gladly consented. Evelyn followed her down the long room, opened the grand piano and lit the candles.

For a few minutes he remained standing beside her, forming his resolve as he listened to the gush of stormy music which her hands evoked from the keys.

His eyes were full upon Hope, as she sat in the lamplight; and it was as if her cold, unbending aspect, and her remote queenliness, sent a new strange, throbbing life through him. He was determined to make her hear him; and, leaving the piano, he walked straight up to her.

It seemed as though the simple act discomposed her: she shrank a little back, holding her head higher, looking as though she would say,

‘ What can you want with me?’

‘ Will you come and see the dogs?’ he asked, in a voice meant to reach his father’s ear; and he added lower, ‘ I must speak to you, alone.’

She looked at him, or rather past him, coldly.

‘ I do not understand you,’ she said.

‘ All I ask is to be allowed to explain. You will not give me an opportunity. I must make one.’

He paused. ‘ God only knows what will become of me if you oblige me to part from you, unforgiven.’

She rose slowly, and said,

‘ I will go with you;’ but the quiet unemotional, polite bearing seemed to argue no prospect of his being met half-way in his delicate task.

They went out of the room together, not unmarked by Lady Caroline, who continued to play softly.

The hall was mostly in fire-light, only one lamp was lit, near the hearth.

The warm radiance of the glowing logs shone far out upon the dark floor, where most of the dogs, being excluded from the drawing-room, had betaken themselves to sleep.

Evelyn walked towards the fire, and moved forward a low chair.

' Sit down, please ; you are not strong yet,' he pleaded.

' I will stand, thank you ; what you have to say cannot take long, and we shall be missed from the drawing-room. I am quite strong.'

Strong ! Yes, indeed. Cruelly strong he felt her to be. She stood up, in her maiden pride, so calm, so unmoved, so sure of herself, that the sight of her well-nigh maddened him. Now—now he must speak ; he had made this occasion for which he so longed, and come what might

he would use it. Had he any right to expect a more encouraging reception?

Across the dark iron bar of silence which divided them, he spoke.

‘I want to tell you . . . to say . . . you must know what I want to say. The words have burned in me ever since I knew—since I found out . . . since I saw Disney.’ His chest heaved. ‘If you knew,’ he said, with breathless haste, lest his voice should fail him before the end, ‘how I have suffered . . . hated myself . . . repented! How the longing to tell you has shaken me till sometimes it seemed too much to bear . . . and then they said you were dying! . . . If I could make you understand what it was to see your face again—to feel there was a chance of telling you what I felt. You think I should not dare to hope you could forgive? Perhaps not . . . I am at your mercy. If you have no forgiveness for me, you

will at least know how I have repented.'

He covered his face with his hands.

She did not stir: after a pause he looked down upon her drooped lids. She had joined her hands tightly together, otherwise there was no sign of feeling about her.

' You taught me a lesson, which I needed,' she gravely said at last, still with her eyes down. ' Nobody, till I met you, had ever openly disapproved of me; at least, not to the extent of declining my acquaintance. I suppose I ought to consider you a useful factor in my education.'

' Your bitterness is quite pardonable. I will bear all your sneers,' he said, in tones of such pain as smote the girl's tender heart.

In an impulse of generosity she held out her hand.

' Please don't think of it again,' she said. ' I forgave you, the day you were

so kind to me on Limmerdale. I am sorry you should have had this suffering to bear, in—in addition to your—your other trouble.'

'My other trouble!' he repeated, blankly. 'Oh, my father's illness!'

She silently withdrew her hand.

'You really forgive me?' he said, as though the fact scarcely brought him that extreme beatification he had expected. 'Me, who, without knowing a single fact of the case, insolently set up myself in judgment against you! And who insulted you so brutally when you were willing to be friends. You forgive too easily.'

'Oh, you make too much of it,' she said, with an air of wishing to have done with these self-accusing reminiscences. 'Your motive, at least, was good, you know: you could not pretend to be civil to a person you so reprobated. Now—I have given

you plenary absolution. Shall we go back to the drawing-room ?'

Was it over ? Apparently.

She had determined to cut him short : had even refused to sit down : had, in fact, behaved as though he and his shortcomings were matters of so little importance to her that it was hardly worth while to trouble her with them.

What more had he expected ? He could not say : he only knew that his present agony seemed greater than he could bear. He moved before her, as she turned to go.

' I have yet to ask your forgiveness,' he said harshly, ' for troubling you concerning such a trivial matter as myself. I am too despicable, I see, for you even to consider seriously. I am the wretched man who engaged himself to a woman he did not love, and yet presumed to criticize you for dismissing—oh, forgive me ! I hardly

know what I say. You are kinder to me than I deserve. Good-bye. I will not intrude my feelings upon you again. Good-bye !'

She paused, and listened, petrified, to this outburst. There was such a fierce undercurrent of wild passion in his voice, the accents seemed to shake her like a strong wind.

' I am sorry to have seemed discourteous,' she said, a little tremulously.

' I think I am mad,' he said ; ' but God knows what it is to live alone, as I do, with every feeling stifled close, without sympathy, without companionship, without an aim in life to keep me from stagnation ! I feel as if—as if——' his voice died away. It seemed as if something he would have said was violently repressed. ' It is not for me to trouble you with this,' he said at last, in his old patient voice, somewhat sadder than usual. ' If I feel

your presence on my hearth so strongly that I forget myself, you must forgive that too. God bless you . . . Are you not going, now ?'

She wavered. A sudden light of womanly sympathy glowed in her face. She looked up at him.

' Major Westmorland . . . if you want sympathy . . . if you think I could help you . . . I should like to. You mistake a little—I am far from despising you. I will listen——'

' No,' he murmured. ' I dare not ! We mean such different things, you and I. You would give me your sweet pity as you would give it to any unfortunate thing you happened to meet : and I should—fling it in your face !'

She started back from him.

' Do you think I will be pitied by you ?' he said, with rising passion. ' I, who have loved you almost from the moment I first

saw you—who tried to hate you because I loved you so wildly—who dared not take your little hand in mine lest that should prove too much for my self-control—who think of you all day and night, whose whole soul is so full of you that nothing else in the world seems definitely real—do you think I will take your pity?’

She stood astounded, her wide gaze fixed upon his agitated face as if with a fascination too strong for resistance. Her silence was the spur that urged him on.

‘I never loved before,’ he continued, with most unusual rapidity of utterance, ‘I did not know the force of it when I asked that poor child to marry me—I thought that I could kill it . . . could kill my love for you! You see how successful I have been—how I have gained the mastery over it! Hope!’ suddenly he gasped, ‘what is it? You

are ill—it is my fault! My intolerable selfishness! I forgot how weak she is!"

She had saved herself from falling, by dropping into the chair she had declined to use.

He sprang to a table near, seized his father's vinaigrette, and held it to her. She seemed not to notice it, nor him. Her hands covered her face.

He dropped to his knees beside her; the mingled force of love and regret moved him as he had never been moved before.

'What have I done?' he pleaded, in a voice so tender, so rich and full in utterance, that it might not have been his own. 'Hope, my queen, my first and last love, speak to me! I will be good! I will not disturb, nor distress you again! I am so sorry, so ashamed of my own want of self-restraint. I cried out to you like a drowning wretch; I will be silent now.'

She did not move; at last he lost patience,

and drew her hands away gently from her face.

It was a different countenance from the set and haughty one which had fronted him during the foregoing interview. Alive with emotion, scarlet, quivering with feeling, drooping under his gaze.

‘Oh, let me go !’ she gasped at last.

‘I am not holding you,’ he replied, unsteadily. ‘Go, if you will.’

And then at last the great swelling wave of feeling broke at her feet ; he forgot all circumstances, all his own deficiencies, all but the one mighty desire of his lonely heart, and, simply because he could not help it, he cried out to her :

‘Will you leave me here alone—without you, Hope, my Hope ? Oh, Hope, stay with me ! Come to me ! Be my own ! I love—I love you so !’

His arm was on the arm of her chair, and he dropped his head upon it; his great

shoulders shook with one deep sob. At last her low voice roused him.

‘ You loved me—that night—in the garden ?’

‘ With all my soul, though then I hardly understood.’

‘ Why did you engage yourself to Leo ?’

‘ Partly to protect myself against your power over me ; partly to please my father ; it was a grossly wrong action, yet at the time my only desire was to do right. What must have been your opinion of me ? Oh, God,’ he passionately cried, ‘ that you and I were back, in the darkness and rain, together on the lonely moor ! Nobody to come between us then ! For that one day of my life I lived indeed !’

He raised his face, with tear-brimmed eyes, to hers ; and what he saw there, sent the blood to his heart with so sudden a rush that his senses reeled. For one long,

glorious instant his eyes seemed burning into hers, the next, she was in his arms.

He drew her, strongly, yet with infinite tenderness into his embrace ; he laid his brown cheek against her damask one ; at last his lips trembled upon hers, and then the world faded out of sight for a time.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE CURSE FAILS.

For love's own voice has owned her love is mine ;  
And love's own palm has pressed my palm to hers ;  
Love's own deep eyes have looked the love she spoke,  
And love's young heart to mine was fondly beating,  
As from her lips I sucked the sweet of life.

THOMAS WOOLNER.

‘ You know,’ he said at last. ‘ I cannot let you go.’

‘ Oh !’ she cried, her sweet face hidden against his neck, ‘ what have you done ? You have taken me unawares ! You took advantage of my weakness !’

‘ Yes,’ he said, defiantly, yet in a voice

half strangled with an emotion too mighty for restraint, 'I have! It was my only chance . . . You have been so terribly strong—too strong for me. Now is my hour. Thank God I have taken it. You are mine, whether you own it or not. None shall take you away from me.'

'You do not know—I have not said I love you,' she cried, rebelling fruitlessly against this newly-manifested strength and mastery.

He held her away from him, and looked at her, his eyes kindled, his breath quick, his whole air that of one who has fought against terrible odds, and at the end, to his unspeakable surprise and joy, finds himself conqueror.

'I saw your eyes,' he said. 'They told me. It was not pity merely, nor womanly sympathy: it was love; and you are mine. Thank God.'

He bent his head reverently; she clasped

her small hands over his: he could feel their trembling.

‘Have you loved me so long?’ she asked.

‘All my life, it seems.’

‘You are honest and good,’ she said, impetuously, nestling to his side, half-shy, half-trustful. ‘You never did a mean thing, nor thought a mean thought. I trust you so.’

‘Oh, my beloved !’

Later on, when they were calmer, she said,

‘You were right to think I had done wrong. It was true—I think I did treat Edgar badly. If I really had loved him, I suppose I should have forgiven him. And yet—I cannot fancy myself capable of loving a man who would do such a thing.’

‘Yet you can love a man who engaged

himself to a girl for whom he cared nothing ?'

She looked at him gravely.

' You never deceived her. You never pretended to care for her. She says so herself.'

' I meant to do my duty to her,' he said, ' arrogant fool that I was. I am so thankful she took her happiness into her own hands. Disney is a good fellow at the bottom ; he will settle down and make her very happy.'

' I think so too,' said Hope, softly.

' If you could know,' he confessed, presently, ' from what a state of despondency —almost despair—you aroused me the other day, when I overtook you in the lane. You did not know you were so near me when you came to this part of the country ?'

‘No, indeed. I had no clear idea of the whereabouts of Feverell.’

‘I was utterly wretched that day,’ he said. ‘My father had almost impressed me with his own superstition. I am the worst fellow in the world to live with a hypochondriac—my spirits are not high enough. You know my father believes that our race is to become extinct next year?’

She had heard no more of it than what Gilbert Greville had told her. Evelyn explained to her the curious origin of his father’s monomania.

‘I really do think it very strange,’ she said. ‘I mean, it is a curious coincidence that you should be the only son of a younger son, just when the moon is on Sunday, the first of March.’

The sound of the brougham wheels on the gravel first brought back their minds to every-day life. Evelyn started.

‘It cannot be time for you to go,’ he cried. ‘Ah! but now it is different. When I said farewell to you in the charcoal-burner’s hut, I intended never to see you again as long as I lived. But now! Oh, my sweet, my own love, soon we shall not have to say good-bye any more.’

She rose from the chair, and stood up stately in the firelight, which flung rosy lights over her soft, sweeping draperies. He felt as if the strength of his overwhelming happiness must kill him as he devoured her with his eyes.

‘It is you—really you,’ he said. ‘You stand here, in my house, as I have so often, so often fancied you. Is it true? Hope, do you not repent? Do you hold to your word? Ah! You have given me no promise yet!’

He approached, and drew her into his proud arms.

‘ Will you be my—wife? My wife,’ he repeated, as if he could not often enough taste the sweetness of the dear words; and in her captor’s strong hold, and with his eyes compelling her, no other course seemed open to the victim than to say,

‘ I will.’

‘ May I tell him—my father—to-night?’ he pleaded.

She turned her small face up to his, and a little smile dawned on the tempting mouth.

‘ Ah! You are marrying in obedience to his wishes,’ she said, softly, ‘ and engaging yourself as a matter of duty. Evelyn! Dear love!’ in sudden consternation, as a look of intense pain passed over his face. ‘ Forgive me! My attempt at a joke was in extremely bad taste!’

‘ It is only that I hate to be reminded

of it,' he faltered, shamefacedly. 'Don't say that I never did anything mean!'

'It was not mean; you mistook your own feelings, that was all.'

'Yes, I had not proved love. I did not know what this was then,' and he drew her closer to his side.

They entered the drawing-room together.

Lady Caroline, though sedulously entertained by her host, was beginning to desire the reappearance of her charge; for the theme that he had chosen to discourse upon was the ruling passion of his mind—the approaching Doom of the Westmorlands. The old missal, in which the prophecy had originally been found, was always close at his elbow, and he showed it to her.

Taken in conjunction with the feudal aspect of all around her, and the intense conviction of the old man himself, the

weird legend somewhat impressed the imaginative mind of the lady, and she was feeling decidedly uncomfortable when the door opened, and the missing pair walked in.

One glance at their faces told their tale to her, at least ; and it was more or less a shock.

We who read, knowing as Jane Austen remarks, by the few pages which remain, that the climax must be reached, are able to take it more quietly. Lady Caroline, assisted by no such token, thought that it was quick work ; but then she had not heard the preceding volumes of the romance. Evelyn's voice had the ring of his completed manhood in it, as he said,

‘ Father, Hope has promised to be my wife ; ’ and the girl, slipping to her knees on the rug beside him, put her arms about

the old man's neck, and, breaking into tears, faltered out,

'I am not good enough for him! I have been selfish and frivolous, while he—you know what he is—you know! . . . But I love him so!'

No fit nor paralytic seizure followed this second announcement. The old man sat dazed for a moment, and then stretched out tremulous hands to the Major.

'My son! My son!'

Evelyn gave his hand in a silence too full for words.

. . . 'So it was this—always this? Eh, my boy?' cried the father, tremulously.

'Always this, father . . . but I scarcely dared to hope.'

'My daughter,' tenderly resumed the invalid, caressing the girl's head, hidden in his shoulder.

'I will be your daughter—I will try to

be worthy of him: to be always with him  
ought to make me good !'

The paternal love, which had seemed  
non-existent in Clifford Westmorland's  
heart, gushed out at length, as if stimulated  
by those sweet words.

' If he is as good a husband to you, as  
he has been a good son to me, my dear,  
you will be a happy woman . . . and I  
expect you will—perhaps—not make his  
duty so hard as I have done.'

It seemed to Evelyn as if his great  
simple heart must burst, for joy of those  
words.

Lady Caroline, with wet eyes, came for-  
ward to offer her congratulations.

' Is the Curse averted ?' she asked, with  
tender playfulness.

' It only says "Withouten Hope," ' said  
Evelyn, triumphantly : ' and Hope is mine  
now.'

‘Evelyn—that is brilliant of you! It never occurred to me!’ cried his father, admiringly.

‘It occurred to me very shortly after I met her,’ replied his son.

‘Well! Then the Sunday Moon is powerless now,’ said Lady Caroline. ‘Let me see—what day does it fall upon, according to the modern kalendar?’

Evelyn looked puzzled, and said,

‘The first of March.’

‘Ah! but not our first of March, surely. This prophecy is fourteenth century, I think you say?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘Well—then their March began somewhere about the middle of ours, did it not? Somewhere about the Ides of our present March? Old May Day was our fifteenth of May, you know.’

‘Father,’ said Evelyn, after a long pause,

‘ did you take into consideration the difference in the almanac?’

‘ No, Evelyn,’ hesitatingly replied the old man, who had flushed crimson, ‘ I cannot say that I did. I certainly never thought of it. Perhaps I should have showed the document more publicly; some one should have discovered so glaring an error. I cannot think how I came to——’

‘ Then, after all, the prophecy does not apply this year,’ cried Evelyn. ‘ If there’s a new moon on the first, there manifestly can’t be another for four weeks, without a convulsion of nature.’

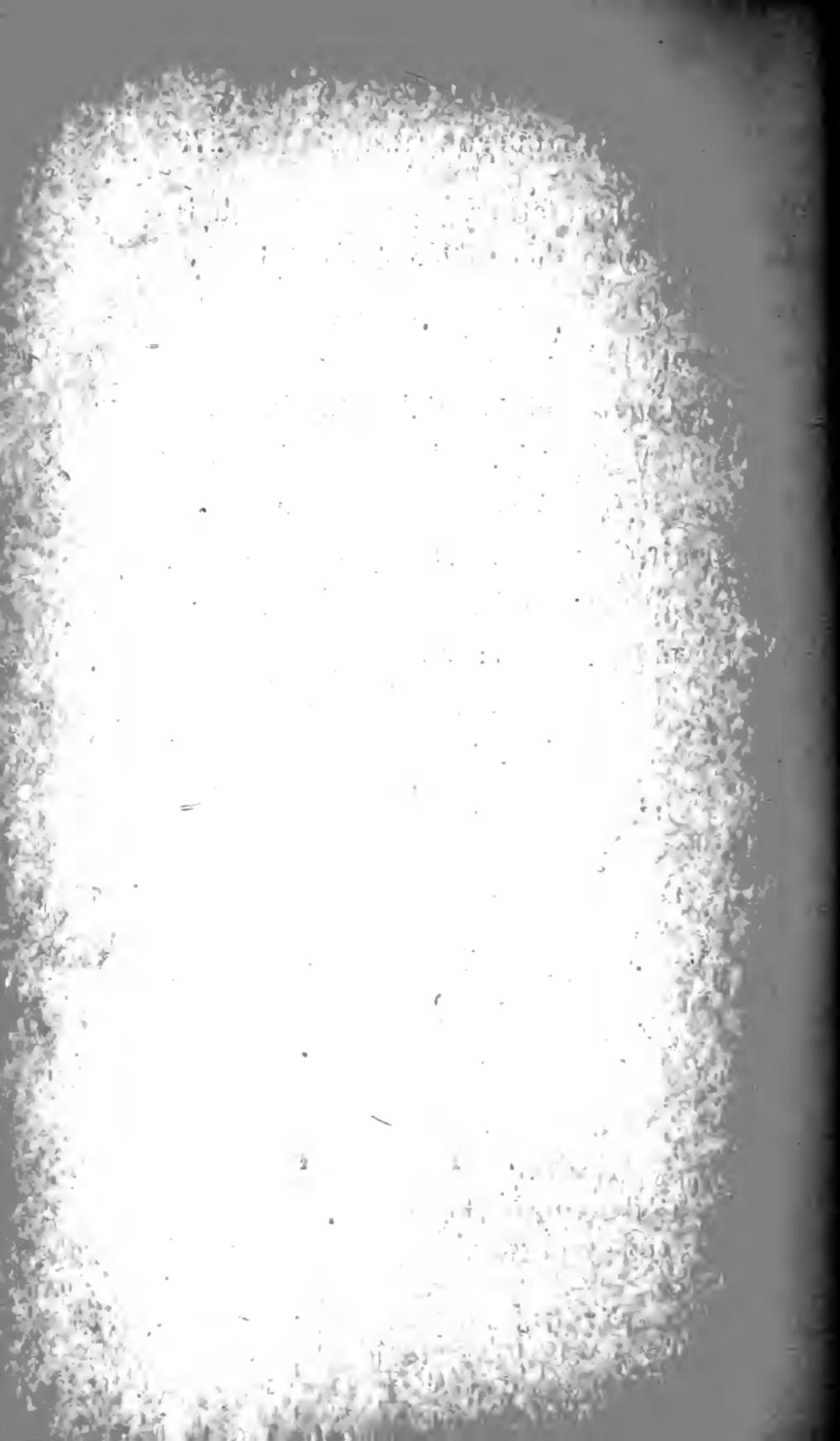
‘ Manifestly.’

‘ Lady Caroline, fair soothsayer, you have broken the spell!’ cried the Major, as his rare, deep laugh rang out from his great sound lungs. ‘ We must wait until the new moon makes her appearance on the Ides of March before we expect our

doom. Father, father, genuine though it be, your curse has failed ignominiously, just as there was always a cheat in the oracles of old.'

'The Curse spoke truly,' maintained the old man, obstinately. 'The technical differences in dates are what it would not concern itself about. It is you who have successfully evaded it. "Withouten Hope," it marvellously said; and Hope is yours now!'

THE END.



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